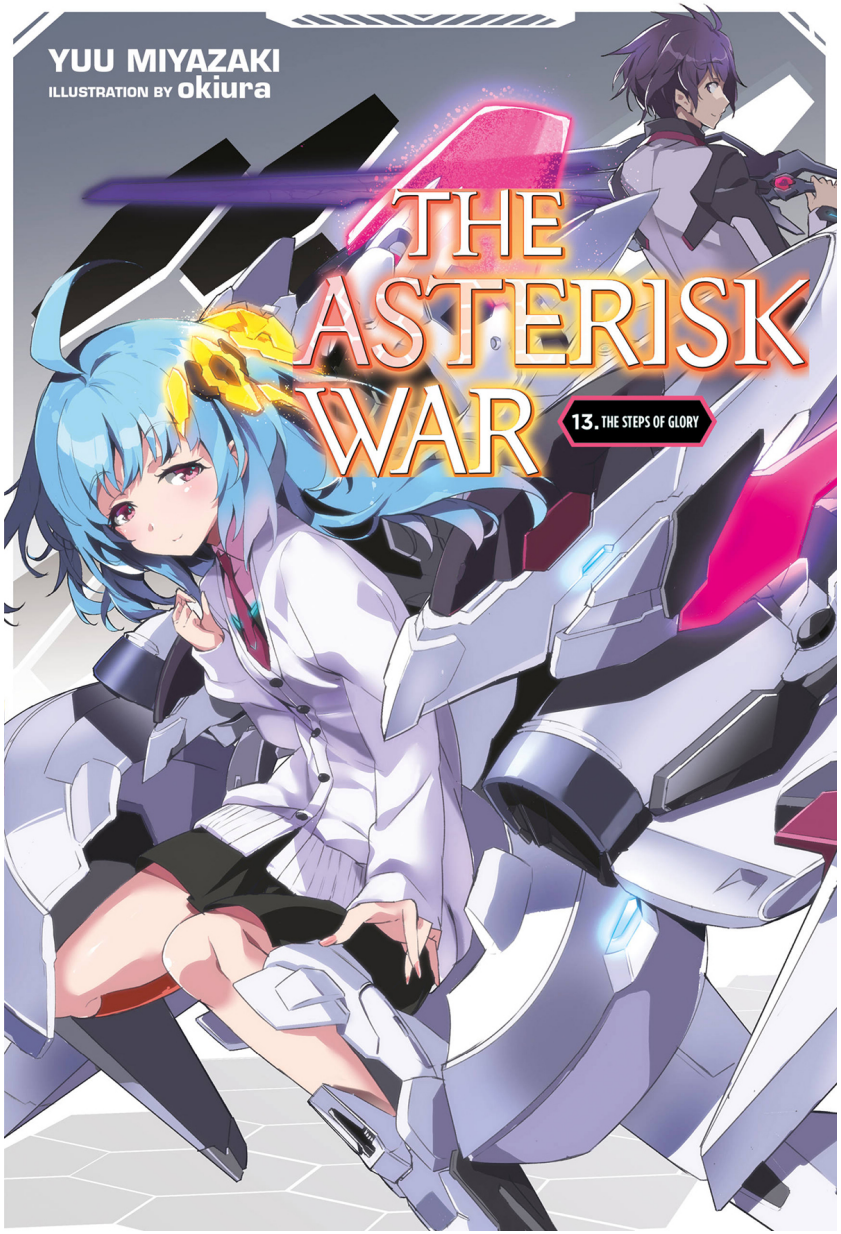
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THE ASTERISK WAR
13. THE STEPS OF GLORY

THE ASTERISK WAR
13. THE STEPS OF GLORY
YUU MIYAZAKI
ILLUSTRATION BY okiura

The Lindvolus

Fuyuka Umenokouji
Fuyuka Umenokouji
"Heed my call!
Jí jí rú lǜ lìng, chì!"
"...AREN'T THEY JUST ADORABLE, MY LITTLE SHIKIGAMI?"

Ayato Amagiri
Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld
Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld
Saya Sasamiya
Saya Sasamiya
Kirin Toudou
Kirin Toudou
Claudia Enfield
Claudia Enfield
Ayato Amagiri
Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld
Saya Sasamiya
Kirin Toudou
Claudia Enfield

# THE ASTERISK WAR

13. THE STEPS OF GLORY

YUU MIYAZAKI
ILLUSTRATION: OKIURA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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THE ASTERISK WAR, Vol. 13
YUU MIYAZAKI

Translation by Haydn Trowell
Cover art by okiura

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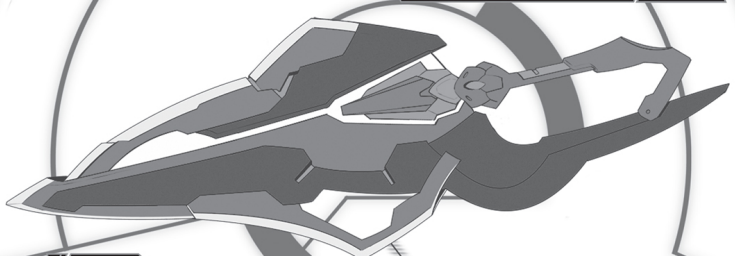

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ser veresta

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# characters

## SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY

### AYATO AMAGIRI

The protagonist of this work. Wielder of the Ser Veresta. Alias Murakumo.

**ALIAS:** Gathering Clouds, Murakumo
**ORGA LUX:** Ser Veresta

### JULIS-ALEXIA VON RIESSFELD

Princess of Lieseltania. Ayato's partner for the Phoenix.

**ALIAS:** the Witch of the Resplendent Flames, Glühen Rose
**LUX:** Aspera Spina

### CLAUDIA ENFIELD

Student council president at Seidoukan Academy. Leader of Team Enfield.

**ALIAS:** the Commander of a Thousand Visions, Parca Morta
**ORGA LUX:** Pan-Dora

### SAYA SASAMIYA

Ayato's childhood friend. An expert in weaponry and machines.

**ALIAS:** none yet given
**LUX:** type 38 Lux grenade launcher Helnekraum, type 34 wave cannon Ark Van Ders Improved Model, and others

### KIRIN TOUDOU

Disciple of the Toudou School of swordsmanship with natural talent. Saya's partner for the Phoenix.

**ALIAS:** the Keen-Edged Tempest, Shippuu Jinrai
**LUX:** none (wields the katana Senbakiri)

### EISHIROU YABUKI

Ayato's roommate. Member of the newspaper club.

### LESTER MACPHAIL

Number nine at Seidoukan Academy. Brusque and straightforward but has a deep sense of duty.

### RANDY HOOKE

Lester's partner for the Phoenix.

### KYOUKO YATSUZAKI

Ayato and company's homeroom teacher.

### PREVIOUSLY IN *THE ASTERISK WAR*...

Having finally awoken Haruka from her long slumber, Ayato and the others hear the truth about her real father, Lamina Mortis, and his terrifying plan. At the same time, Madiath reminisces about his past...his thoughts taking him back to that time he first met Akari. The strongest fighters from each of Asterisk's six schools begin their steady preparations for the Lindvolus, but Ayato is forced to enter against his will when Lamina Mortis uses Haruka's life as a bargaining chip. As a result, he finds himself standing in the way of Julis's chance for victory, and the pair's relationship grows strained. Now, at long last, the curtain begins to rise on the assembled heroes who are ready to battle it out at the Lindvolus...

# CHAPTER 1
# AKARI YACHIGUSA II

Akari Yachigusa had never seen her mother smile.

Even in her earliest memories, her mother's expression had always been like a sheet of ice, her eyes cold and indifferent as she looked down on Akari. If, from time to time, some hint of emotion might shine through, it would inevitably be nothing other than hysterical anger or hatred. And while she had never resorted to physical violence, she had rained down tempests of verbal abuse more times than Akari could remember:

*"Why did you have to be a monster?" "If only I had never had you…" "I wish that you had never been born!" "It's all your fault!"*

*You*—her mother had never once even called her by her name.

But even so, Akari had always wanted her mother to love her.

All it took was for her to show even the slightest hint of a smile, and her mother would scowl at her, as if she couldn't even bring herself to cry. And so, before she knew it, in order to keep from upsetting her mother, Akari found herself wearing a permanently ambiguous expression, a look that contained no suggestion of either joy or sorrow. But even so, her mother would inevitably avert her gaze as soon as she caught a glimpse of Akari's face.

The Yachigusa family was an old and noble lineage on the verge of collapse, obsessively clinging to their antiquated traditions, unable to adapt to a changing world. They had managed to hold on to some shred of their former glory through their dealings with the integrated enterprise foundation Galaxy, but even so, they were now little more than a faint shadow of what they had been before the Invertia. For the Yachigusa family, the Invertia wasn't just a

calamity that had reshaped the world—more than that, it was a nightmare that had cast them down into ruin.

And to that family had been born a product of the Invertia, a Genestella. It was only a matter of course that they would act the way they did. First, they drove away Akari's father, who had married into the family, and then they began to look down on her mother with unmasked contempt.

Akari's misfortune was further compounded by the fact that she had been able to manifest her Strega abilities even while still an infant. Stregas and Dantes unable to control their abilities were known to rampage and, given their physical and mental characteristics, were capable of causing considerable disruption to the lives of those around them. Considering that her ability granted her the power to completely halt the flow of mana within a given range, she had often inadvertently shut down electrical appliances and other utilities that relied on meteoric engineering. This, of course, had only further served to ostracize her and had made her mother's position even more precarious.

Before long, her mother's health had deteriorated to such an extent that she stopped seeing anyone. For her part, Akari was driven out of the residence and forced to live alone in a small detached building that had previously served as a storehouse. Her meals and daily necessities were all taken care of by the servants, and so she came to lose all contact with the other members of the family. She wasn't even permitted to walk around freely and was essentially in a state of perpetual confinement. The family did everything in their power to conceal her very existence. Unable to attend school, she had spent her childhood holed up in that cramped, gloomy building.

Her sole comfort was an old-fashioned computer terminal. It was through this terminal that she first learned about the Festa—and about Asterisk, a place where Genestella could live in freedom, a city where it was possible to make a name for oneself through one's own efforts. She devoured every piece of information she could find about this dreamlike world and, though she couldn't exactly recognize it at the time, found her heart longing for it.

The first turning point in her life came when she was ten years old.

A banquet was being held to celebrate the seventieth birthday

of the head of the Yachigusa family, Akari's grandfather. While the family had fallen on hard times, and while the other old houses may have looked down on them with scorn, they nonetheless sought to maintain appearances in whatever paltry way they could.

Of course, Akari wouldn't be attending. The bustle and commotion of the event didn't reach her corner of the vast grounds —indeed, she couldn't hear anything but the usual rustling of the trees that closed off the building from its surroundings. But then, all of a sudden, she detected a faint presence outside and opened the sliding door to the veranda.

As she glanced around, she caught sight of a girl standing stock-still with a puzzled expression on her face, alone in the middle of the path leading through the grove. She appeared to be around the same age as Akari herself and was dressed in an extravagant, tailored outfit. She was undoubtedly the daughter of one of the guests.

When the girl noticed Akari, a wave of relief washed over her countenance, and she hurried toward the small building.

"Ah, thank goodness! I went out to get some fresh air, but then I got lost… I mean, how can those adults expect me to just stand there looking pretty while *they* get to do all the talking? It's so boring, don't you think?" The girl smiled at her as she sat down on the edge of the veranda. She had a somewhat frivolous attitude, at least as far as Akari could tell.

"Ah…," Akari responded with a vague, forced smile, unsure what to make of her visitor.

The girl, however, shone a beaming, flawless grin. "I'm Kotoha Rokujou. Are you from the Yachigusa family?"

Akari found herself lost for words at this simple, innocent question.

She simply didn't know for herself whether she was really considered a Yachigusa, nor whether it was all right for her to admit as much to a complete stranger. On top of that, this was her first time ever talking to another girl of a similar age. She simply had no idea how she was supposed to act in this situation.

In the end, she could respond with nothing more than a slight nod.

At this, however, the girl named Kotoha leaned forward in excitement, trying to get a better look at her. "Really?! What's your name?"

"…Akari Yachigusa."

"Akari. Akari. Hmm… That's a wonderful name! But what are you doing out here by yourself, Akari? Isn't it lonely?"

She had never thought about that before. It was certainly possible that she was lonely, but she had been living like this for as long as she could remember, and so she felt as if she had long since become numb to such feelings. But now that she thought about it, there seemed to be no other way to describe the desolate, empty hole in the middle of her heart. In which case—

Kotoha waited, swinging her legs back and forth, while Akari mulled this over.

"I wonder…," she said finally. "I don't really know." It was a vague answer, said with a vague smile and a vague tone of voice. Indeed, that word—*vague*—seemed to describe her very existence.

"Wow, really? If it were me, I'd be so lonely I'd end up crying!" Kotoha, however, was nothing if not straightforward. "Say, Akari. Do you mind if I stay here for a while, so we can talk? I mean, if I went back, it'd just be so boring!"

Akari startled at how direct the girl sitting across from her was, and she could do little but nod along in silence.

With that, the two entered into an almost rambling, directionless conversation, talking about their favorite foods, their families, the flowers blooming in the garden, the dreams that they'd had the previous night, and more.

Strictly speaking, Kotoha did most of the talking, with Akari merely listening. Every now and then, however, she would ask her a question, or put in a word of her own, until the details of her life began to leak out one drop at a time.

"So you're a Genestella, Akari? That's so cool!" Kotoha's eyes opened in wonder as this, too, came to the fore. "I know another Genestella, you know? A boy. His family is a long line of swordsmen, and he can even stand up against the adults. Well, I mean, I don't know him all that well… The Toudou style, I think it's called? Something like that anyway. Have you ever heard of it?"

"…A little."

Among those she had seen competing in the Festa, there were several sword fighters who belonged to that school. From what little Akari knew, it seemed to be one of the more prominent ones, with branch dojos all throughout the world. If Kotoha's family had dealings with such an important house, then they, too, must be of

considerable status.

"There are two brothers, right? The older one, Kou, he's just a normal person, but the younger one, Sei, he's a Genestella, and he's so nice, too! He was the first Genestella my age I'd ever met, you know? So I kept asking him all these questions, but he answered every last one of them without even getting the slightest bit annoyed!"

"…He sounds like a good person."

Kotoha wasn't exactly letting her thoughts run free, but her gentle voice continued without pause. "Right? Ah… I've done it again, huh? Heh-heh, sorry. Maybe I went a bit overboard? I'm just so happy to have a second Genestella friend." Kotoha broke out into a cute grin, jokingly hitting herself on the head.

"…Friend? Do you mean…me?"

"Ah! Maybe I went a bit too fast…? But you know, I really want to be your friend, Akari!"

"A-ah, I mean… I…," Akari stammered, unsure of what to do or say.

To think that someone like her could make a friend…

However, at that moment—

"Well, well, look what we've got here. Just like they said."

"Looks like it paid off."

All of a sudden, two men appeared on the small path leading through the grove.

One was dressed in a tank top, even though spring had only recently begun, his muscled physique covered in tattoos. The other man was wearing sunglasses, a leather jacket, and jeans. Judging by their appearances, they certainly didn't look like the kind of people who would have been invited to the banquet.

"You shouldn't wander off alone, little lady," the tattooed man said with a vulgar smile. "You know these people can't afford proper security, right? They ain't like you Rokujous."

It was clear from the way the two men held themselves that they harbored malicious intent.

"Um, who might you be?" Kotoha asked quizzically, perhaps yet to grasp the situation.

"Come on, you don't expect us to give you our names, do you? Just play nice and come along now."

They had come, it seemed, for her.

"What should we do 'bout the other one?" the one in sunglasses

said, pointing toward Akari with his thumb.

His tattooed companion let out a short chuckle, before waving his hand unconcernedly. “Can’t have her making a scene. We’d better dispose of her.”

“Got it.”

The next moment, the man in sunglasses quickly circled around behind her. “Sorry ’bout this.”

With that, he put his right hand over her mouth, bringing a knife-shaped Lux toward her neck with his left—but before he could push down, Akari shoved him with her elbow, grabbing him by his wrist and hurling him away.

“Ngh?!”

No sooner did the man hit the ground flat on his back than Akari lunged toward him and, without even the slightest hesitation, crushed his throat with her fist.

“!” The man writhed around, letting out a hoarse rasp, but Akari paid him no further mind as she turned her gaze toward his companion.

“What the…?!”

“Huh…?!”

The tattooed man’s eyes had opened wide in disbelief, while Kotoha, too, was staring toward her blankly.

“Y-you little…!” The man quickly returned to his senses, reaching for a pistol-shaped Lux at his waist.

But he was too slow.

Before he had time to aim it, Akari lunged toward him. She delivered a powerful kick to his crotch, and then she slammed her elbow into his jaw as he bent forward in pain. He fell to the ground, the whites of his eyes showing, foam spewing from his mouth.

“Phew…” Akari let out a deep sigh.

She had no fighting experience, and of course she had never been trained in self-defense. On top of that, these were the first Genestella other than herself that she had ever met.

So she had imitated the actions she had watched on TV, of the people whom she had seen in the Festa. That was all. She had been confident, however, that learning those moves would be effective. After all, the two men were clearly far from those fighters that she had seen competing in Asterisk.

“…A-amazing! You’re so strong, Akari!” Kotoha was jumping up and down in excitement, applauding her.

“I…I was just protecting my friend,” she responded, working up her courage.

At this, Kotoha broke into a wide smile.

And with that, a group of panicked men in suits came rushing toward them from the mansion.

From what Akari heard several days later, the two men had intended to kidnap Kotoha. The Rokujou family had played a major role in the founding of Galaxy and, even today, had strong ties with its upper management. The would-be kidnappers’ plan, it seemed, was to use Kotoha to blackmail her doting father and, through him, force Galaxy to meet their demands.

Kotoha was, of course, partly in the wrong for having left the mansion by herself; but to allow attackers to infiltrate their own residence—the primary responsibility clearly lay with the Yachigusa family. The only way they were able to save any face at all was thanks to the fact that Akari had come to Kotoha’s defense—and because Kotoha’s father wanted to keep the incident private. This wasn’t, however, an act of goodwill toward the Yachigusas—rather, the Rokujous seemed to have their own reasons for wanting to keep knowledge about the attack from entering the public arena.

Nonetheless, Akari began to be treated a little differently. She was still loathed, still ostracized, still kept at a distance—her situation in that respect hadn’t changed—but ever since the incident, Kotoha began to pay her regular visits. The Yachigusa family, for their part, wasn’t in a position to turn down the attentions of the all-powerful Rokujous. Which meant they could no longer afford to treat Akari the same way they had up till now.

Akari, of course, had no hand in these deliberations. In any event, Kotoha was her first and only friend. Those hours she spent with the cheerful, innocent young girl became, in a way, a sort of salvation.

After all, it was thanks to Kotoha that she was finally permitted to attend school. Kotoha had insisted, it seemed, that she be in the same class. Viewing her very existence as a source of shame, her family—her mother included—would have no doubt preferred to keep her holed up in her little corner of the residence grounds for her whole life and resisted this with a litany of excuses. The most significant of these was apparently their concern that she couldn’t control her Strega abilities. Every now and then, she would still go

on her little rampages and halt the flow of mana everywhere around her—if she did that outside, the damage, they argued, would be enormous.

So she showed them over the following year that she could control herself. While she didn't have her ability fully under control, strictly speaking, she stopped trying to run away, and she stopped rampaging around the grounds. Until now, she had always hated her abilities, had always hated the fact that she was a Genestella, a Strega. It was those qualities that lay at the root of all her troubles, and it was because of them that her mother wouldn't see her. The fact that she had come to accept herself for who she was wasn't because she longed to go to Asterisk, but rather because she had etched her hopes into her mind from an early age, and they were now exerting a powerful effect over her abilities. In other words, she suppressed them through sheer force of will—no matter the toll it exerted on her physical well-being.

In the end, having lost their main reason for holding her back, Akari's family eventually gave their permission for her to start school. That had been helped along, it seemed, by the insistence of Kotoha's father. There may also have been, Akari thought, some degree of economic assistance involved. But, she suspected, the one she really had to thank was Kotoha. While her father didn't hold the same prejudices toward Genestella as the Yachigusa family, he did not have any particular fondness toward Akari himself. He had helped her, no doubt, simply as a token of his appreciation for her having saved his daughter and because he wanted to keep Kotoha happy.

In any event, Akari began attending the same girls' middle school as Kotoha. She was the only Genestella there, but with the Rokujou family looking over her, she was able to experience a comfortable, peaceful student life.

Her only real concern was her mother, who had opposed her leaving the Yachigusa residence until the very end. When Akari had sought out her permission directly, the woman had merely railed abuse at her through the sliding door, without even coming out to see her. The fact that, in spite of her mother's opposition, Akari was nonetheless permitted to attend school was a sign of how low her mother's status had fallen in the eyes of Akari's grandfather and other relatives. Indeed, from what Akari could tell, her mother was now viewed as even less important than she herself was, given that

she at least had a connection to the Rokujous. In the end, her mother's pent-up resentment began to consume not only her heart but her body, too, and she was sent to a distant hospital far off the beaten path.

Since then, Akari hadn't seen her even once. After all, even if she went to visit her, her mother would no doubt just turn her away.

The second turning point in Akari's life came during the winter before her graduation from high school. She had been chatting with Kotoha on the veranda outside the building she had come to accept as home, when her friend broke the news.

"Say, Akari, there's something I want to tell you. I'm thinking about getting married once I graduate."

"Huh…?" Akari found herself turning tense at this sudden confession.

"You know him, right? It's Sei."

"…Ah, from the Toudou family."

Now that she mentioned it, Akari recalled having met the earnest young man on several occasions. He was the second son of the main branch of the Toudou family and had been Kotoha's friend since childhood. Akari herself had been invited to visit his dojo a few times and had even faced off against him in a mock duel.

"That's… Congratulations."

"Heh-heh, thanks. But if I told Dad that I wanted to join his family, I'm sure he'd be really opposed to the idea," Kotoha said with her usual bright smile.

Akari had no doubt about that. Kotoha was an only daughter, so of course her parents and relatives were all expecting any prospective husbands to marry into their own family.

"But I'm not going to give up!" she added, putting her hands together as she worked herself up. "I'll bring him around. Just you wait!"

Akari couldn't help but be impressed.

No matter what Kotoha set her mind to, no matter how long it took, she would unquestionably see it through to the end. The fact that Akari had even been able to attend school in the first place was due to her friend's stubborn perseverance.

Just as she would no doubt ultimately persuade her family in this case, too.

“So what about you? What are you going to do once you graduate?” Kotoha asked her.

“Huh? Uh, I… I don’t know yet.” Akari was caught by surprise at having so suddenly become the topic of their conversation, but her answer was an honest one. Unlike Kotoha, who always knew precisely what she wanted, her own thoughts were as vague as ever.

“I see… But you know, you should do what *you* want to do.”

Faced with a sentiment that seemed to see through to her innermost desires, Akari could do little but return a forced smile.

As it happened, she was wrestling with herself over precisely that.

She wanted to go to Rikka—to Asterisk—to that fabled city where Genestella were celebrated. If she did, she felt, she would be able to transform her vague, noncommittal self into something more.

But of course, her family would never allow that. Rather, they would oppose her every step of the way. And more than anything, she couldn’t rid herself of the thought that it would only end up bringing further suffering to her mother.

“You know, Akari… As the daughter of a wealthy family, I guess I’ve led a sheltered life, wanting for nothing, so maybe I’m not really capable of fully understanding your troubles…”

“Indeed. But you know, I like that straightforwardness of yours.”

“Still, I’ll do everything I can to support you,” Kotoha said, gripping her hands tightly. “So I want you to go for it.”

“…Thank you,” Akari responded, lightly grasping her hands in turn.

It was a selfish thing to say—but at the same time, it was so like Kotoha.

That night, Akari told her relatives what she wanted. They didn’t approve, as she had expected, but their opposition wasn’t as strong as her own resolve. And besides, her existence was no longer a secret, so they seemed to have resigned themselves to the reality of their situation. Perhaps that was why they had yielded to her so much sooner than she had expected. Or else, perhaps having realized that they could no longer carry the secret of her existence to the grave, they saw it as an opportunity to send her somewhere far away and out of sight.

They did, however, make her agree to several conditions. First,

they wouldn't support her financially—not so much as a penny. In other words, she would have to pay for her tuition and living expenses herself. Second, she wasn't to bring any more attention to herself than she already had. That meant that she wasn't to enter the Festa, nor the rankings either—nor anything else that might drag the Yachigusa name through the mud.

Given that all she wanted was to live in the city of Asterisk, she accepted those conditions without complaint and penned a letter to her mother to convey her feelings.

Shortly afterward, she passed the entrance exam for Seidoukan Academy's university program without a hitch and took her first steps into the bright, sunny world of the famed Academy City on the Water.

And then, one night, she met Madiath Mesa.

# CHAPTER 2
# AKARI YACHIGUSA III

"But are you sure you're okay with that kind of promise?"

Akari found herself being pulled from her reverie into the present by a certain young man's voice.

"To be honest with you, I can think of a lot of words to describe the student council president," he went on, "but *trustworthy* isn't one of them. Not that I'm trying to get in your way or anything, I mean."

They were on their way back from the student council president's office. Madiath, walking along beside her, scratched his head, his whole demeanor one of diffidence.

The two had entered the Eclipse just the previous day—but as it happened, Seidoukan Academy's student council president had been among the spectators and, having seen firsthand exactly how well they had performed there, was now insisting that the two of them enter the upcoming Phoenix. Both she and Madiath had simply wanted to pass their days in peace and quiet, but given that Madiath was only able to attend the school thanks to his special scholarship, he hadn't been able to refuse. For her part, given that her relatives were all but guaranteed to oppose it, Akari had turned down the suggestion, but in the end, she had been all but forced to agree to let the academy attempt to persuade her family to allow her to enter.

There was no sign of anyone else but them in the corridor, bathed red by the setting sun. She came to a sudden stop, shaking her head and flashing Madiath her usual ambiguous smile. "I'm grateful for your concern. But you know, I can't help but think that

you wouldn't have been exposed if you hadn't entered the Eclipse for my sake. So it's really my fault for getting you caught up in everything like this. I'd like to apologize," she said, bowing her head.

"There's no need for that," Madiath replied, waving his hands with an awkward look.

Madiath Mesa was undoubtedly more than a little odd. At first glance, he came across as a kind-natured, agreeable young man, but every now and then his eyes would take on a chillingly cold appearance. They were the eyes of someone who had completely cut himself off from everything else—of someone who regarded everyone outside himself as if they were no more than moving clumps of earth.

While he did seem to be showing some degree of emotion during their match at the Eclipse, when he had faced Scarmask and the Fallen Swordsman, even then he had seemed to have shown little care one way or the other for his opponents.

That coldness of his was no doubt due to his upbringing. Akari had only heard a little so far, but from what he had told her, he had often been forced to fight to the death since he was a small child. It didn't take much imagination to picture what that would do to someone's heart.

And that particular side of him seemed to call out to her. It wasn't sympathy or pity or solidarity. Rather, what she felt was something close to respect for this person, so like herself but yet who had gone through such different experiences in life.

Until now, Akari had never fallen in love with anyone. Of course, Kotoha had been an important friend for many years now, but there was no mistaking that the two belonged to different worlds, with a vast, unseeable wall standing between them. She had once put that down to her being a Genestella—but even after having come to Asterisk, she still felt the same way toward all the other Genestella she had met. In other words, her sense of isolation was a unique problem—a unique deficiency—stemming from herself, and so she had concluded that it wasn't the kind of thing that could ever be healed. She had all but resigned herself to that fate when Madiath had appeared before her.

"Well, there's no need for you to enter the Phoenix if you don't want to…," he pointed out.

"No, it's all right," Akari answered, taking off down the corridor

once more. “And besides… This might be a good opportunity.”

“A good opportunity?” Madiath repeated as he followed after her.

“Yes. For me to face my mother.”

And to move past the vagueness that seemed to define her.

“…Do you really need to do that, though?”

“Well… Now that you mention it, I wonder. I can’t really say for sure… But it’s thanks to you that I’ve started feeling this way, Madiath.”

“Me?” He raised an eyebrow in surprise. “What did I do?”

Without answering, Akari took another step forward—and then spun around and flashed him an enigmatic smile.

He had done a lot. He had come to her aid—both when they had first met and when they had entered the Eclipse. But more than that, he had been himself. He had proven to her that there were others like her in this world—that she wasn’t alone.

“Thank you. For coming into my life.”

For Akari, Madiath Mesa was, perhaps, the first person she had ever fallen in love with.

The next week, Akari was called to the office of the student council president once more.

When she entered the room, she was startled to find several of her relatives waiting for her, her grandfather included. Every last one was an important figure in the family.

“…Grandfather,” she said, bowing her head in greeting.

At this, her grandfather glanced toward her, his eyes filled with the same hatred and scorn he had always shown her, before snorting contemptuously. “Hmph. So you’re still wearing that idiot look of yours.”

It was a cold voice, one that showed not even the slightest hint of familial concern.

“Shameful.”

“You haven’t changed at all.”

The voices of the other two, standing behind him, were practically echoes of her grandfather’s.

*…?*

There was something in those voices, however, that left her feeling uncomfortable.

Their aversion to her didn’t seem to have changed, and yet they

couldn't hide a certain restlessness, a certain something bordering on vulgarity.

"…Can this bungling girl really be of use to you?" her grandfather murmured, shaking his head and glancing toward the student council president behind his desk. That gaze, however, normally so caustic, now hid a hint of eagerness.

That was all it took for Akari to understand what was going on.

As promised, the student council president really had persuaded her grandfather—and through him, the whole Yachigusa family.

"Of course, of course, she really is quite outstanding. We've no doubt in our minds that she'll make quite a contribution to the academy," the president said with a cheerful laugh. "And needless to say, *to you as well*."

"That would be nice, if true… We really have had our hands full with her carelessness ever since she was a girl… But if you insist, we'll be happy to oblige, indeed…" Her grandfather nodded repeatedly.

This was practically all the confirmation she needed.

The family patriarch turned his cold gaze toward her. "That's right, Akari. Just this once, we'll let you enter this—what did you call it? Festa?—that you've set your eyes upon."

His bare repugnance and hatred were unchanged. Akari had no way of knowing exactly what the student council president—or rather, Galaxy—had offered him in exchange for letting her enter, but she doubted that, whatever it was, it had improved her own standing in their eyes.

But she had known that from the very beginning. She had never even bothered to hope that her grandfather and his cronies would ever deign to recognize her.

All she wanted was the love of one person—even if she would never receive it.

"…And what did my mother say?" she asked in a soft voice.

Her grandfather broke into an ill-humored frown. "She agreed to it. Obviously."

Akari found herself wondering whether that was really true.

She knew full well that her mother had had no say in matters for a long time now. Even if she had been opposed to it, there would have been nothing that she could have done. And because her mother was institutionalized somewhere, Akari couldn't help but wonder whether the others had even bothered to inform her.

“What’s with those eyes, girl? You think I’m lying to you?” her grandfather flared, anger and wrath beginning to seethe from his whole body.

“No, not at all…”

“Well, Akari certainly has been worried about her mother,” the student council president interrupted, flashing her a warm grin. “I can guarantee you that we haven’t burdened her in any way or compelled her against her will. We’ve treated everyone fairly, just as we promised. But there’s no need to take my word for it, Miss Yachigusa. See for yourself.” And with that, he pressed a button on the terminal built into his desk, opening a large air-window.

“!”

There, in front of her, was the image of a familiar Japanese-style room.

A room deep inside the Yachigusa residence.

The figure, sitting up on a futon spread over the floor, was unmistakably her mother.

“Mom…”

How many years had it been since Akari had seen that face, her long black hair, her tall, elegant features? She looked slightly thinner than Akari remembered, but apart from that, she didn’t look to have aged very much.

“But Mom’s… I thought she was supposed to be in the hospital…”

“She was discharged. She’s recovered,” her grandfather explained disinterestedly.

“I see… I didn’t know.”

“What makes you think we’d go out of our way to tell *you*?” he said brusquely.

*“Akari.”*

No sooner did she hear that voice than a shock wave swept through her whole body.

She had no memory of her mother ever having called her name.

Her mother’s expression was unreadable. Her frigid, disinterested gaze, mixed in with confusion and exhaustion, was just as Akari remembered it—but like with those of her grandfather and the others, there was something else mixed in as well. She couldn’t pin down what it was, though.

*“I shouldn’t need to tell you this, but I can’t accept you. We’re just too different. I’m not strong enough to overcome that.”* Her mother

spoke in a soft, hoarse voice, as if breathing out a tired sigh. *"And yet… It's also true that you've finally brought something to the Yachigusa name. My father might not be willing to recognize that, but for my part, I am grateful."* On the other side of the air-window, her mother bowed her head.

"Please, Mother, you don't need to… I'm just…," Akari stammered.

Her mother, however, paid her little heed. *"I'm doing this because it's necessary. This tournament of yours might simply be an amusement for you, but still… If I can help the family, I'll do what I have to. I can't accept you, but at least I'm willing to have this conversation."*

"—!" Akari's eyes flew open wide in shock.

Her body trembling as she fought to keep her emotions from bursting forth, she managed to squeeze out weakly: "That's enough, Mother…"

She knew that her mother wasn't lying. And that being the case, what more could she possibly hope for?

"Are you convinced now, Miss Yachigusa?" the student council president asked again, clapping her lightly on the shoulder. "Can we count on you to enter the Phoenix?"

When she left the student council president's office, Akari found Madiath leaning against the wall outside.

"Ah, were you waiting for me? Thank you, Madiath."

"…I wasn't expecting this. Judging by how you look, I'm guessing the discussion went well?"

"Yes, fortunately."

Madiath narrowed his eyes suspiciously for a moment but quickly returned to his usual easygoing expression. "Well, I guess that's good. I suppose you'll be my partner in the tournament, then?"

"It looks that way. I hope I don't end up weighing you down," she said, bowing her head deeply.

Madiath gave her an exaggerated shrug. "You'll overtake me with a little training. Although, that might not even be necessary."

"Huh?"

"I've looked into it, and there doesn't seem to be any major players entering the Phoenix this time around. So long as no one like the Ban'yuu Tenra signs up at the last minute, we shouldn't

have any real difficulties taking the crown," he said, as if it really wouldn't be any problem at all. "So if you want to prepare for it, you'd probably be better off thinking about what kind of wish you want granted."

"Wish…? That might be difficult…"

If she were to ask for money, at least she wouldn't have to worry about paying for her tuition any longer, but winning the Festa seemed like overkill if that was all that she wanted. In that case, she wondered, maybe she would be better off using her wish to benefit the outlook of her family?

"Speaking of which, have you decided what you want?" she asked Madiath.

"Hmm… Well, now that I've been exposed, I was thinking of freeing myself from this special scholarship. But then again, seeing as I only have to put up with it until I graduate, I might as well save my wish for something else. Not that I really want anything in particular, though…" He paused there, rubbing his chin with his hand as he fell deep into thought—when suddenly, he looked up. "Ah, right. Maybe I'll ask for you?"

"…Huh?" Akari, not realizing for a moment that he was emphasizing the noun in that sentence and not the preposition, found her face turning scarlet. "Th-that's, Madiath, I…!"

"Ha-ha, I'm joking. Anyway, the Festa claims not to grant wishes that violate people's human rights. They wouldn't give anyone away like that."

"…Right."

Realizing that he was making fun of her, Akari had pretended to be taken aback by what he had said, but she was surprised to find that, deep down, she was somewhat disappointed.

"Well, there's no use counting our chickens before they've hatched. Why don't we go for a little training?"

"Ah… R-right."

There wasn't a lot of time left before the Phoenix was due to get underway.

Madiath may well have been right about there not being any particularly strong opponents entering this year, but the Festa was always filled with surprises. There would be no telling how it would turn out ahead of time. Akari, who had spent much of her life trapped in that dark, lonely existence, knew that well.

"Well then, I'm looking forward to working with you, Akari,"

Madiath said, holding out his right hand.

"Hee-hee, the pleasure's mine," Akari replied, taking it in her own.

"Huh…?" Madiath murmured, frowning.

"Hmm? What is it?"

"Nothing… It's just—this is the first time I've seen you smile like that."

"Huh…?"

That day, that moment, was to be a turning point in both their lives.

For better or for worse.

*

"Chairman. It's almost time."

Madiath opened his heavy eyelids at the sound of his subordinate's voice and found himself staring up at the ceiling of his familiar office.

He must have fallen asleep in his chair, he realized. Checking the time, it seemed that the opening ceremony of the Lindvolus was indeed due to get underway shortly.

“Ah, my apologies. Thanks for waking me. It wouldn’t do to sleep in on a day like this, now, would it?”

“You look exhausted,” his subordinate replied, fetching his coat for him.

“The big shots at the IEFs just won’t leave us alone around this time of year. I guess it’s wearing even me out.”

“That’s understandable. You’re overseeing both the most anticipated Festa in history and the Concordia, after all.” His subordinate’s voice was filled with praise and admiration. He was a simple, honest man, this subordinate—which no doubt meant that he wouldn’t make much headway in life.

“The Concordia has been out of my hands for a while now. I’ve merely been involved in preparing the facilities and receiving our guests. All to maintain and develop the Festa, of course,” Madiath said, putting on his coat and glancing out the window.

He was heading toward the huge dome beyond the orderly lines of buildings in front of him—to that arena that would, from today, be the center of the world’s excitement and passions for the next two weeks.

It was also the place where he and Akari had fought side by side.

“It’s time,” his subordinate said again, unable to contain his own excitement.

“…Indeed it is,” Madiath murmured in response as the flood of emotions bore down on him.

There was no way that his subordinate would be able to understand the nature of what lay behind those emotions—nor, for that matter, would his comrades Dirk or Varda be able to grasp them, either. They were his—and his alone. Hatred, anger, pity, conflict, and everything else that went with them.

“Let’s get going. This Lindvolus will be one for the history books—I guarantee you that.”

# CHAPTER 3
# THE BEGINNING

“At the opening ceremony of the Gryps last year, I told you that the skills and prowess of our contestants continue to rise with each passing year. That is a hard, undeniable fact. I am confident that the abilities of Genestella will continue to grow with each generation, that Lux development will continue to reach new unimaginable heights, and that tactics and battle strategies will continue to advance alongside them. All future Festas are evolutions of the past—and that includes the events that we are gathered here to witness today.”

Atop the platform at the edge of the stage of the Sirius Dome, Madiath Mesa was extolling the praises of the Festa to both the contestants and their spectators alike.

This was Ayato’s third time standing on this stage, watching Madiath issue his customary speech.

“However, that does not in any way diminish the value of each and every Festa. As I’m sure that you, the fans, are well aware, no two Festas are ever alike, and the spectrum of brilliant souls that we see each time is always unique. From two-time champion of the Lindvolus Helga Lindwall to our grand slam–winning Xinglou Fan, it should be apparent to all that some matches remain memorable in spite of the passage of time.”

Madiath’s voice was clear, cheerful, and brimming with confidence—the perfect mix of qualities to stir the massive crowds. As ever, his speech was expertly delivered to control the excitement of the hundred-thousand-plus spectators and to set back on track the hearts of any contestants who had begun to waver in their

decision to compete.

His rhetorical skill was, frankly, something to be admired.

At least it had been, before Ayato had learned that he was the man behind Lamina Mortis.

“However, let me add one more thing. The Festa is a struggle for superiority—and that is what leaves so many absolutely enthralled. It is always manifested in different ways, but as far as raw strength is concerned, there are always those who shine brighter. Such individuals transcend the flow of time. The two prior contestants whom I just spoke of can be taken as proof of that.”

The investigations of Ayato and the others had proceeded steadily over the past few months, and that time hadn’t been put to waste. They had sifted through and pieced together countless evidence—from surveillance footage provided by the city guard, to information on Madiath’s activities supplied by Galaxy (which understandably amounted to a great deal), to Ayato’s and the others’ analyses of the physical sites where they had encountered Lamina Mortis or the Varda-Vaos—and those clues, inconsequential when looked at individually, together pointed to only one conclusion: that Madiath Mesa was Lamina Mortis.

From what Ayato understood, Claudia and Isabella were close to obtaining the needed conclusive evidence—the knowledge of conspirators within the huge organization that was Galaxy.

However, they didn’t have any indisputable proof relating to those accomplices just yet. Claudia suspected that there were several such individuals within Galaxy, all likely brainwashed by the Varda-Vaos. Even so, as chairman of the Festa Executive Committee, Madiath benefited from something similar to extraterritoriality and was normally out of reach of any one of the IEFs. Cornering him, therefore, wouldn’t be easy.

“And so, allow me to declare to you all here and now my confidence that this year’s Lindvolus will go down as the greatest in history! I fully expect the next two weeks to shine brighter than all Festas past and, indeed, all Festas yet to come! That is the miracle of the contestants we have gathered here today!” Madiath spread his arms wide, his dramatic tone of voice fanning the flames of the audience’s passions.

In response, a tsunami-like wave of cheers engulfed the Sirius Dome. The tempest seemed to have reached a height that dwarfed the previous Festas that Ayato had participated in. Both the Phoenix

and the Gryps had been accompanied by wild enthusiasm, but the current frenzy was something else entirely.

Madiath was certainly right that there might never be another Festa to rival the present Lindvolus. There was every possibility that it could end with the first-ever instance of someone winning three consecutive victories in the solo tournament—or else only the second grand slam in the tournament's history, and there was an exceptionally high number of top-ranked fighters and other famous individuals from the various schools competing.

"Now, then…," Madiath continued calmly, after waiting for the cheers to subside. "Given this rare occasion, allow me to touch on one more thing."

He paused there once more, as if for dramatic effect. There was no denying that he had the crowds completely within the palm of his hand.

"The honor and glory belonging to the tag partners who emerged victorious in the Phoenix were part of the team who conquered the Gryps and, of course, were the supreme champions of this very Lindvolus. They are worthy of the highest praise—their names are without compare! There can be no doubting their triumphs."

As he listened to Madiath's unending speech, Ayato glanced across the stage toward Julis.

There were 256 contestants gathered in the arena. There had been twice that number at the Phoenix, and five times it at the Gryps, but even so, the energy radiating out of the arena was in no way inferior to the previous tournaments, and in Ayato's eyes, at least, seemed to exceed them.

There were many familiar faces among them. Beside him stood Saya, all but nodding off to sleep. Also among Seidoukan's Page Ones were Lester, taciturnly standing with his arms crossed; Feardorcha O'Neill, alias Cuélebre, the Ringed Serpent King; and Azumachi Ibara, alias Touki, the Ruinous Demon.

And of course, a bit farther away, was the Witch of Resplendent Flames, Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld, the Glühen Rose.

*Julis…*

She was standing at attention, her manner as dignified as always. However, Ayato could see that she had fallen into a sense of despair. Her resolve and determination in wagering everything on this tournament went beyond most other entrants.

“However,” Madiath continued, his voice becoming more animated. “I know, and I’m sure you all know—people are already calling this Lindvolus the Festa of Festas. Seventy-three years ago, when the first Festa was held in this city, we started with only an individual tournament. It is perhaps appropriate that, with the passage of time, we’ve come to name this tournament after the greatest of all creatures, the mythical dragon… The way I see it, the essence of the Lindvolus is different from the other Festas. In the Phoenix and the Gryps, we expect two qualities in our contestants—strength and a bond between fighters. There, it is only by fighting hand in hand with one’s tag partner, with one’s teammates, and through testing the strength of those bonds, that our champions rise to the top. That is of unfathomable merit and worthy of undying respect.” As he spoke, his tone became suddenly feverish, sending a flood of confusion coursing through the stadium.

There was no missing that Madiath’s speech was entering unusual territory. The Lindvolus *was* often referred to as *the Festa of Festas*, but it was highly irregular for its organizers to admit that. It went without saying that doing so could lead to a loss in status for the Phoenix and the Gryps. Perhaps there were those who would appreciate the remarks, but the number of people it risked upsetting would by no means be small.

Even when Ayato had met Madiath in person, his impression of the man had been that he strove to maintain an equal balance. He would never have expected him to make such an obvious slip of the tongue.

Which meant that it was undoubtedly intentional.

“However, the Lindvolus is different. In this original form of the Festa, champions are born from strength alone! No matter how great your bonds with friends or allies, they won’t save you here. It is the purest form of battle, in which you will all carve the way forward using no more than your own power and abilities. That, in my view, is what makes the Lindvolus the Festa of Festas… Strength! A universal language that illuminates the way forward!”

Madiath’s words were growing more heated, until at that moment, the buzzing audience fell suddenly silent. The spectators, the participants, even Ayato himself—they all caught their collective breath at the sheer intensity of those words.

“Now, to you, the fighters gathered here upon the steps of glory!” Madiath cried out, his clenched fist raised. “Show us your

power!”

At this, a deafening roar of cheers and applause beyond any Ayato had yet experienced engulfed the stage.

Many of the contestants, it seemed, had allowed themselves to get carried away also, cheering along with the crowd as they raised their fists.

*What are you planning, Madiath Mesa…?*

Ayato, however, could feel the man’s cold gaze staring down at him and found himself unable to shake the premonition that some great unseen gears had just been set in motion.

*

“Here you go, Ayato.”

“Thanks, Sylvie.”

Having finished warming up, Ayato accepted the towel that Sylvia held out to him in the now-familiar prep room.

“That’s my Ayato. Always keeping your calm, even when you’re a few short minutes away from your first match. You’re not going to let something like this work you up, huh?”

“I’m just used to it now. I mean, this is my third year in a row here.”

Of course, he couldn’t say that he wasn’t nervous, but at least he was much more relaxed than he had been during the Phoenix.

“But this is your first time being chosen for the opening match, right?”

“Well, I guess so…”

Ayato’s match wasn’t only the first of this year’s Festa, it was also the first that would be held in the Sirius Dome. It was fair to say that it received perhaps the most attention of any match this early in the tournament, even among those held in the Sirius Dome, where most of the favorites were allotted.

In essence, the structure of the Lindvolus wasn’t too dissimilar to that of the Phoenix or the Gryps. Thirty-two matches would be held each day across all the venues, the first round running until the fourth day, the second round running until the sixth day, and the third round running until the seventh day. That first week served as the preliminaries. After that, the eighth day served as a day of rest—and then, on the ninth, came the main tournament.

Incidentally, the most anticipated match of the preliminaries,

the debut of the reigning champion Orphelia Landlufen, more popularly known by her alias Erenshkigal, was to take place on the fourth day.

"Well, I guess it's only a matter of course that they'd give it to one of the favorites," Sylvia said with a mischievous wink.

"But you've got a match yourself tomorrow. Are you sure you're okay coming here to support me? Or is this also a matter of course?"

As far the bookmakers were concerned, Orphelia was considered the absolute favorite to win again this time around. Next up on the list probably came Sylvia, the runner-up from last time. And then, Ayato suspected, he himself was the third-favorite.

"Think of it more as an expression of my love." Sylvia laughed, tapping him on the chest with her finger.

"Ah, love…" As usual, Ayato couldn't tell whether she was joking.

At that moment—

A whistle tweeted twice before someone spoke.

*"Right; stop there! Move away, move away!"*

As Ayato turned in the direction of the shrill sound echoing throughout the room, he caught sight of Saya, standing projected in an air-window, glaring at him with a whistle held between her lips.

*"You're getting too close, Sylvie. This is your warning."*

"Oh my… You're as strict as ever, Saya," Sylvia said with a wry smile, raising her hands slightly to show that she wasn't going to argue with her.

At this, Saya's eyes narrowed. *"I can't be too careful with you. It's a good thing I came prepared with this whistle."*

"Ah, did you make it yourself?"

*"Heh-heh, you can never be too prepared."*

"If you're going to worry about preparations, shouldn't you be focusing on your match? Yours is coming up shortly, too, no?" Sylvia pointed out with a feigned expression of being confounded.

The two might have been busy teasing each other, but as far as Ayato could tell, they actually got along pretty well. That was no doubt thanks to the fact that they had been working together as a team over the past few months as they investigated the Golden Bough Alliance. And it wasn't just Saya with whom Sylvia had made a friendship—she had become good friends with Kirin and Claudia, too.

Her unique personality no doubt played an important role in all that.

*"As long as Julis and Kirin aren't here, I'm the only one who can protect Ayato. So no matter how far away I am, so long as I'm breathing, I won't let anyone touch him."*

"…Come on, now, you aren't all that far away. The Procyon Dome is, what, only twenty minutes from here, if that?"

Ayato found himself wanting to say almost the same thing. To begin with, Saya had been standing next to him during the opening ceremony just a short while ago. Second, because hers was also one of the first matches of the season, she'd had no choice but to make her way to the Procyon Dome as soon as the opening ceremony had finished.

*"Exactly. That's the problem. Why is it only my match that's all the way out here? Everyone else's is over there. It's extremely dissatisfying."* In the air-window, Saya puffed out her cheeks in displeasure. She looked a little older now that she had grown out her hair, but when she acted this way, she was just as Ayato remembered.

"Well, I guess it's because of all the big names they've got this year. Under any other circumstances, I'm sure your achievements would be more than enough… Although, I heard that they might be basing it on our positions in the rankings this time."

As Sylvia had said, given that Saya had reached the top four in the Phoenix and was part of the winning team in the Gryps, it was only natural to expect that her matches would take place in the Sirius Dome, too. However, given the unusually high number of noteworthy figures participating in the Lindvolus this time around, the fact that she wasn't a member of the named cult undoubtedly put her at a disadvantage.

On top of that, in order to maintain some semblance of a balance between the three large stadiums and the seven medium-sized ones, a number of easily recognizable contestants had also been sent to the other parts of the city. Saya, Ayato guessed, was viewed as one such individual, being dispatched to the Procyon Dome to help draw the crowds to some of the less highly anticipated matches taking place after hers.

"I was here for the last Lindvolus, but the Executive Committee seems to be doing things differently this time. I mean, they didn't even tell us who's doing the main commentary until the last minute. Talk about a big surprise, huh?"

"Ah, right… I wasn't expecting *her* to be doing it, either," Ayato said, turning his gaze toward the air-window by the wall.

Projected there was the usual announcer who covered the main stage, ABC's Mico Yanase, along with another woman, a sullen figure with disheveled hair and thick glasses. There was no questioning her natural beauty, but it was in stark contrast to her counterpart's meticulously manicured appearance.

*"And now to introduce the sharp-eyed expert in charge of commentary and analysis this year! The manager of the most popular private website associated with Asterisk, said to get hundreds of millions of page views each day during the course of the Festa, let's all welcome the editor of Odhroerir, Zaharoula!"*

*"…Hello."*

*"I'm sure our viewers must be pretty surprised! The measures you've taken to avoid appearing in the media are legendary, Zaharoula! What convinced you to make an exception this time around?"*

*"I didn't* want *to do this! Who in their right mind would* want *to make a show of themselves like this?! It's all because of that damn meddler, D—"* Zaharoula paused there, pulling at her hair with one hand as if to yank it clean from her skull as she hung her head.

Mico, sitting alongside her, looked taken aback for a split second but quickly returned to her professional self-possession. *"Um, Zaharoula…?"*

*"Ah… Well, I mean, I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to watch this year's Lindvolus with my own eyes. Let's leave it at that."*

*"R-right! This year's Lindvolus sure looks like it's going to be something special!"*

It was easy enough to see that Zaharoula wouldn't be an easy person to keep on script. Ayato couldn't help but wonder whether she was up to the task of following the entire two-week tournament.

*"Er, let's move on, then. Which entrants do you think our viewers should most look out for this time around…?"*

*"Argh, I hate having to choose. I mean, every single contestant has their own strengths and weaknesses. You can see for yourself if you log in to Odhroerir. I might be able to give you something more once we know who's being put against who in the main tournament, but there's no way I can say anything about the preliminaries."*

*"W-well, you're right, of course, but still…"*

"…She likes to speak her mind, huh?" Ayato murmured, unawares.

“I’m pretty fond of that kind of person, myself. She’ll probably give Mico a hard time, though.” Sylvia grinned.

“*Are you sure she’s the real thing?*” Saya asked dubiously.

Certainly, Zaharoula’s identity had been shrouded in mystery until today. Even her age and gender hadn’t been public knowledge. It probably wasn’t just Saya who found it hard to believe that the woman in the air-window was actually the famed operator of one of the most highly regarded unofficial ranking sites.

“Well, I guess we’ll find out once we hear her analysis. As much as I hate to admit it, Odhroerir’s analyses are pretty much spot-on. I’m looking forward to it.” Sylvia chuckled.

Odhroerir’s rankings were said to be even more accurate than those of each individual school. It was rumored that even most bookmakers throughout the world based their odds on the unofficial website’s own ranking system. So if this person really was Zaharoula, Ayato wanted to hear her analysis of the tournament for himself, too.

“*She’s right, though*,” Saya continued. *“We’ve practically got a bargain-bin sale of favorites this time around, with everyone being spread around the different blocks. If you asked* me *to guess who the winner would be this early in the tournament, I wouldn’t be able to name anyone other than Erenshkigal.”*

“I’m grateful that we won’t have to face each other until the main tournament at least…,” Sylvia remarked.

It was common practice for the most promising entrants in the Festa to be intentionally allocated to different blocks so they wouldn’t end up facing one another in the preliminaries. Thanks to that, Ayato wouldn’t have to face Sylvia, Saya, or Julis until at least the bracket for the main tournament was drawn.

“But there *are* quite a few dark-horse entrants this time around, too,” Sylvia added. “You’ll have to be careful with our little Minato, and then there’s everyone Xinglou’s been training up as well.”

“Ah, the Liangshan…”

It was well-known in the upper echelons of each of Asterisk’s six schools that Jie Long’s Xinglou Fan, the Ban’yuu Tenra, had secretly begun training select students from each of the other institutions at her own private school, the Liangshan. Ayato had no idea what she was hoping to achieve by potentially disadvantaging her own school’s chances at taking victory, but it seemed that Queenvale’s Minato Wakamiya, along with Lester and Julis from

Seidoukan, counted among her students. That was the only possible explanation Ayato could think of for Julis to be continuously injured the way she had been recently.

"…*Just how many of them are taking part in the Lindvolus, though?*" Saya murmured, shaking her head.

They knew how many students from Seidoukan and Queenvale were participating, thanks to Claudia and Sylvia being the student council presidents of both schools, respectively, but as far as the other schools were concerned, they had no way of knowing precisely how many students were actually attending the Liangshan.

In any event, none could afford to let their guards down even in the preliminaries.

*"Aha…! Hold on to your seats, it's almost time for the opening matches to get underway!"* Mico's voice rang out from the air-window.

"Ah, I'd better get going," Ayato murmured as he checked the time.

*"You can do it, Ayato!"*

"Look after yourself, Ayato."

"Thanks, you two," he replied, waving back to both Saya and Sylvia.

The enthusiasm and excitement of the mass of spectators wound their way deep into the dark passage leading from his prep room toward the stage. The din was a veritable whirlpool of emotion: Anticipation and envy, jeers and scorn, encouragement and resentment all mixed together, descending upon him as he walked toward that battlefield steeped in the most unseemly of desires.

The first time he had traversed this path, he'd had a partner by his side.

The time after that, he'd had a full team of companions.

Now, however, he was alone.

"…!" At that moment, he opened his eyes wide at the sight of a figure standing ahead of him farther down the corridor. "Julis…," he murmured, her name spilling from his lips as he came to a stop.

Given that she, too, had a match coming up today in the Sirius Dome, it wasn't completely unexpected that she would be somewhere nearby. However, Ayato hadn't anticipated that she would be waiting for him here, given how much distance she had put between herself and the others over the past few months.

"…"

She remained silent, her expression mournful as she leaned against the wall. Shaking off her hesitation, she looked up at him. "I… I have to win this tournament, no matter what it takes. I'm the only one who can stop Orphelia Landlufen. I've got no choice but to defeat anyone who stands in my way… Even you…"

"…I know." Ayato nodded understandingly.

"Which is why…"

She slowly approached him. As she passed by, she murmured in a voice almost too low to catch, "*Which is why I can only support you up until I have to beat you myself.*"

Ayato found himself turning around at these words, but Julis kept on walking into the distance.

Those words, however, were enough.

She hadn't changed. He knew that now.

"Thank you, Julis!" he called after her.

There was no response, but Ayato watched on until her figure disappeared into the distance.

He also had a reason for needing to win the tournament: The life of his sister, Haruka, was at stake. Perhaps, he wondered, Julis had found herself in a similar situation, having to push everything else aside to claim victory at any cost.

Nonetheless, she had just said that she would support him until push came to shove.

Of course, there was no guarantee that they would actually end up facing each other. There was every possibility that he would be defeated before that time came or that Julis would be instead—or indeed, that both would be eliminated.

But even so, her words instilled confidence in him.

The best outcome by far would be for either or both of their problems to be resolved before that time. To that end, Kirin and Claudia were desperately working to put a stop to Lamina Mortis and the Varda-Vaos.

*I wish I could lend them a hand… But we did agree that the participants would focus on the tournament.*

He had no choice but to believe in them.

With that, he cleared his mind as he stepped forth through the entrance gate into the blinding light of the stadium.

*"And here we are! Making his way through the east gate is one of*

*our most anticipated contestants, the champion of both the Phoenix two years ago and last year's Gryps, and of course, one of this season's leading stars, hoping to score the Festa's second-ever grand slam! Wielding the Ser Veresta, the Blade of the Black Furnace, complete with the power to burn through all of creation, it's Seidoukan Academy's number one, Ayato Amagiri!"*

Maintaining his calm despite the dazzling floodlights and the rapturous applause, Ayato crossed the bridge leading into the stadium and leaped down onto the stage.

His opponent, it seemed, had entered ahead of him and stood waiting on his side of the stage wearing a defiant grin.

"Heh-heh! What's it like being so popular, Ayato Amagiri? Care to share a bit of the limelight?"

Standing across from him with his hands on his hips was an imposing student in an Allekant Académie uniform. His black hair was close-cropped, his skin dark, and his build large. His mean eyes and unshaven face made him look older than he was, and while he was only two years Ayato's senior, he looked to be well into his twenties.

Gose Kevut. He belonged to Allekant's Sonnet faction, specialized in practical combat, and was twenty-first in the school's rankings. While he wasn't a Page One, his relatively high position nonetheless attested to his skill.

In principle, the most promising entrants weren't put up against one another in the preliminaries, so that they would all reach the main tournament. However, the Festa was, when all was said and done, a form of entertainment, and so certain promising individuals were always allocated to each block to allow for the potential of an unexpected upset (although, given the unusually high number of skilled entrants, this time that only applied to the most notable contestants).

On top of that, the organizers no doubt wanted to avoid the opening match being too one-sided.

"I couldn't believe my luck when I heard! If I can bring you down here, I'll have made a pretty good name for myself, huh?" Gose bellowed, activating his spear-shaped Lux.

"I'm afraid I don't plan on losing to you quite that easily," Ayato replied, pulling the Ser Veresta from the holder at his waist to the cheers of the audience.

"Ugh! You listening?! You'd better not sell me short, or it'll

come back to hurt you!" Gose spat back, fixing him with a deadly glare.

*"The opening match is about to begin! Will Contestant Kevut be able to score an upset? Will he be able to keep up with Contestant Amagiri? I can't wait to find out!"*

*"Hmm… From what I've seen in the recordings of their official ranking matches, it's hard to say how it will turn out…"*

*"I'm sure there's no need to repeat Amagiri's history here in this stadium, but there are high expectations riding on Kevut, too! He didn't waste any time after transferring to Allekant earlier this year before making his way into the rankings, and last month made his way up to twenty-one!"*

*"Well, he might be a newcomer, but normally I'd say he's a little too old for us to expect all that much from him, at least in my opinion… More importantly, this time, though…"*

As he listened to Mico and Zaharoula's back-and-forth, Ayato activated his weapon, adjusting it to the size of a Japanese katana.

*"Wow, hold on a second, Zaharoula! That's…!"*

*"Ah, it looks like he's finally able to control its size now. I'd better update his profile on the site…"*

This would be Ayato's first public match wielding the Ser Veresta at the size he was most comfortable with. The audience began to seethe with excitement as they realized what they were about to witness.

"Hmph! You think you can cow me just by showing off?"

Gose was clearly taken aback by this revelation, but he was a relatively successful fighter himself, and so it was unclear how much this new variable would factor into the match. Ayato had watched several recordings of Gose's official ranking matches, too, and had seen enough to know that he was a rather orthodox fighter with the ability to carry his matches to his advantage.

*"Given that Contestant Amagiri didn't have many weaknesses to begin with, if he can finally optimize that Orga Lux, this is big news!"*

"*That's true, but still*"—

With Mico and Zaharoula still discussing among themselves, Ayato's and Gose's school crests suddenly lit up, the automated voice sounding out throughout the stadium.

*"Lindvolus Block A, Round 1, Match 1—begin!"*

—"*that raw strength of his is something else, though, right?*" Zaharoula finished.

And with that, the keen point of Gose's spear came hurtling toward him.

"—?!"

Ayato managed to dodge it, but his opponent followed through with a flurry of rapid strikes. He was clearly aiming straight for Ayato's school crest. Ayato deflected the barrage at the last possible moment, before finally finding an opening and leaning in for a counterattack. Gose, however, as if having read his movements, suddenly pulled back—and as he did so, the tip of his spear began to glimmer and swell in size.

*Meteor Arts…?!*

Ayato, a shiver running down his spine, leaped backward, giving up on his counterattack.

At that moment, the now-oversized spear hurtled toward him, grazing the tips of his hair before slamming deep into the ground, the impact so powerful as to leave a sizable crater.

"Aw, come on! I was sure that would work…!" Gose muttered, readopting his fighting posture as the dust settled.

Both the audience and the commentary had fallen completely silent, as if the excitement of just a moment ago had never even happened.

*"Yep, Ayato Amagiri's mix of offense and defense really is superb. It would have only taken one slip there, and he would have lost the whole match."*

The only sound to break the silence was that of Zaharoula's voice echoing across the stage, when—

"Whoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooa!"

A deafening roar descended down from the galleries, a veritable war cry of giddy excitement.

*"Er, ah, sorry! But wait, h-hold on a second! Contestant Amagiri is Seidoukan's number one and the champion of both the Phoenix and the Gryps… But his opponent just…!"*

*"Putting his achievements aside, you saw what happened. Contestant Kevut doesn't look like he's about to be outdone, no matter who his opponent is."*

Ayato found himself in agreement. Gose's skill was

unmistakably first-class—perhaps even around the same level as Ernest's or Xiaohui's.

"Argh, damn it, you had me thinking I'd got you there, making a move like that. Why won't you take the bait? Taking people by the nose is supposed to be my thing."

"…No, you almost had me fooled there."

It was an undeniable fact that Ayato had misjudged Gose's skill and ability. At the very least, he was employing now a completely different fighting style than what Ayato had seen in the recordings of his previous matches. His footwork and movements, for example, were at a totally different level.

Out of all the people in that stadium, perhaps only Zaharoula had seen through him.

"Heh, interesting. I guess you're the kind of guy who doesn't cut corners, no matter who you're facing. Talk about a nuisance," Gose said with a grin.

His tone of voice, his facial expressions, even his whole mood had undergone a sudden and dramatic change. The mocking glint to his eyes was now gone, his now-softened appearance coming across as somewhat creepy and unsettling.

"Of course not," Ayato replied. "That would be disrespectful to my opponent."

As Ayato spoke, the spear-like tip of Gose's Lux began to give off a shower of sparks, before suddenly falling off from its handle.

"Oops, damn it… Eh, pretty clever, Murakumo. Looks like you got me," Gose said, throwing away the remaining portion of his Lux and shrugging.

*"It looks like Amagiri managed to land a counterblow when he dodged that Meteor Arts attack. He's a pretty shrewd fighter, that one."*

*"I—I see! I guess no matter how strong you are, no normal Lux can stand up against Contestant Amagiri's Ser Veresta!"*

Zaharoula must indeed have been the real thing if she had caught sight of his counter, Ayato thought.

"Heh-heh, I guess she was right. It's useless trying to face one of the Four Colored Runeswords with just any old Lux," Gose said, pulling another activation body out of his pocket.

The second Ayato caught sight of its core, a wave of unease shot down his spine.

"Looks like I'm gonna have to use my fallback, huh?" Gose muttered, activating it.

At first glance, it looked remarkably similar to the spear-shaped Lux he had been using until a few seconds ago.

However, Ayato could sense something twisted and brutal emanating from its strange core.

*"Er, that's…not an Orga Lux? At least it doesn't look like any of Allekant's registered Orga Luxes… Given Contestant Kevut's affiliation, could it be one of those new mass-produced Orga Luxes that Team Androcles announced at least year's Gryps?"*

*"Hmm, I've never seen anything like that before, either… No, hold on, wait a second. There* is *a match, but it looks pretty dated…"*

Ayato tried to shut the confused commentary out of his head as he stared across the stage toward Gose.

At that moment, the image of silver-haired young woman flashed through his mind.

"A Lost Lux…"

# CHAPTER 4
# THE PRELIMINARIES I

"What's that?"

At the sound of the sudden voice echoing from behind him, Dirk Eberwein sat up from his seat on the sofa, furrowing his brow and glancing around. "What are you doing here?" he growled.

He was in Le Wolfe Black Institute's luxurious, hotel-like special viewing lounge at the Sirius Dome, and he was supposed to have been alone.

"I came to see Madiath, but it sounds like it would be best not to approach him right now," replied his visitor—the Varda-Vaos—coolly.

"Of course. The Enfields and their ilk are still sniffing around."

The fact that they were paying so much attention to him lately no doubt meant that they had unmasked his alter ego, Lamina Mortis. In spite of that, however, they had yet to make a direct move against him. That could mean only that Galaxy was behind them. After all, if any of the other foundations knew what the Enfields seemed to know, they would no doubt put everything they had into apprehending him immediately. Galaxy, however, had more important considerations that prevented them from acting—they undoubtedly wanted to recover Varda or, at the very least, make her disappear forever, and any rash course of action could jeopardize that. Which meant, too, of course, that if Varda was to go and brazenly reveal herself, she would end up blowing the whole thing.

"So? What are you doing here? Go somewhere else if you want to watch the match. Somewhere where you won't bother us."

Dirk waved his hand as if to shoo off a small puppy, but Varda merely ignored him, approaching the window. Below her, Ayato Amagiri's match against Gose Kevut was well underway.

"What's that?" she repeated, her voice unusually sullen. "Last year's mass-produced Orga Luxes were almost all abominations… but they hardly compare to *that*. It's…so disagreeable."

"Oh…?"

Dirk found his lips curling in amusement at her obvious frustration. For him, watching the misfortunes or failures of others was like having the barren wasteland of his soul be nourished with cool, sweet nectar.

All the more so when it was this visitor from the other world who hardly ever revealed her emotions.

"Huh," he said, crossing his arms. "You're telling me you've never heard of the Lost Luxes?"

"…Lost Luxes?"

Dirk activated the air-window by his armrest, enlarging it for her to see.

Shown there was the live broadcast of the match unfolding below. As far as Dirk was concerned, this was the easiest way to watch it.

At that moment, Gose's second spear-shaped Lux managed, somehow, to deftly repel Ayato's rapid counterattack with the Ser Veresta.

"Hmm! Azdaja must have been hiding a pretty powerful pawn, if it can hold off the Murakumo. Well, I guess it's just a useless treasure as far as those old ghosts go…"

"Azdaja? In that case, the Lost Luxes are…"

"Right. Azdaja developed them…or *was* developing them. They were never finished."

From the very outset, the Lost Luxes had been designed with the goal of producing weapons more powerful than any other Lux—Orga Luxes included. The Lost Page Incident that had taken place many years prior and, indeed, the similar yet-unnamed disturbance that had occurred just a short while ago had both involved these Lost Luxes. The individuals responsible for both incidents had since been arrested, but the official investigations hadn't gone so far as to reach the organization behind them.

That was to be expected. It was widely believed that the organization—Azdaja—couldn't possibly exist.

“There are a few prototypes lying around… They’re pretty powerful, but they demand a hell of a cost. I hear they sacrificed dozens of people to test them, with only one success, so they must have decided that they weren’t worth it. I guess it wasn’t the outcome they were hoping for, huh?”

“What are they trying to achieve by doing this?” Varda, still staring down at the ongoing match, asked coldly.

“Well… With how worked up everyone’s gotten about the Lindvolus, they’re probably just trying to shake things up. I wouldn’t put it past them to try to throw a wet blanket over this whole thing.”

Azdaja’s guiding principle was clear—to take revenge on the six foundations that presently controlled society and the world. They simply didn’t have the means to wage that war directly.

Ever since the world economy had collapsed following the Invertia, the remaining corporations had engaged in an aggressive contest of mergers, acquisitions, and partnerships, until at last only eight great behemoths had remained: Galaxy, Jie Long, Elliott-Pound, W&W, Solnage, Frauenlob, and the now-defunct Samandal and Severclara.

Samandal had originated as a major oil company based in the Middle East and, at the beginning of the Reconstruction, was said to have had an overwhelming advantage over the other integrated enterprise foundations. They began to decline, however, once society’s chief energy source switched to manadite. Finally, finding themselves at the losing side of a prolonged economic war, their competitors broke them apart and split what remained between themselves.

Severclara had been based out of the north, with a research and development division that was said to have been the most advanced of any of its time. However, they had found themselves in direct confrontation with the other foundations following the discovery of a class-one-grade vertice meteorite deposit in central Asia, which eventually developed into a large-scale open conflict involving Solnage, Frauenlob, Jie Long, and Galaxy. While they had met with initial success in their war efforts, the remaining companies worked to isolate them and pick off their supporters, until finally, abandoned by their one-time allies Solnage and Jie Long, their defeat was ensured. As a result of that dispute, the remaining IEFs agreed to avoid open conflict as far as was possible, and thus the

modern balance of power was born.

Azdaja had been founded by the remnants of those two organizations and, even today, possessed a considerable degree of power and influence. It was, therefore, reasonable enough to suspect that they had placed pawns of their own within Asterisk's six schools.

However, whatever resources they possessed still paled in comparison to those of the aboveboard foundations. At most, they could only hope to be a momentary nuisance.

"Throw a wet blanket over it? What specifically do you mean?"

"Come on, think about it. For example…if they could stop Orphelia from claiming three consecutive wins or get in the way of Murakumo or Glühen Rose scoring a grand slam. They probably want to eliminate those three as early as possible."

"Pathetic," Varda all but spat out. "What a waste of effort."

"I don't like saying this, but I agree," Dirk replied, giving her a slight nod. "Then again, who can say for certain? But that isn't the problem here. This is the opening match, of all things. I wouldn't put this down to coincidence, but I doubt they've got enough sway to influence the tournament brackets."

"…It must have been Madiath, then…"

"Probably. I wouldn't put it past *him* to go and do something like this without consulting anyone."

It was hard to believe that Madiath would have had any direct contact with Azdaja—given their history, the prospect of them teaming up with someone directly affiliated with the IEFs was extremely slim. He was probably just taking advantage of them as a means toward his own agenda.

Dirk glanced outside at the amassed crowds. Based on the way they were working themselves up, anyone would have thought that they were witnessing the championship match itself.

*Sure, it'll keep them on their toes, giving them a high-level match right from the get-go. But he's not going to be happy if the Murakumo ends up losing. Not that I care one way or the other, but isn't he taking too many risks lately?*

As far as the Golden Bough Alliance was concerned, the greater the frenzy surrounding the tournament, the better.

Dirk understood that, and yet—

"It's almost over."

"…Hmph!" he snorted, returning his gaze to the air-window.

*

“Ha, you’re even better than they say, Ayato Amagiri!”

A blinding blast of light burst forth as Ayato repelled the head of Gose’s oncoming spear with the Ser Veresta. The impact was so strong that it almost felt like it was ripping his arm clear from his shoulder.

“Ugh…!”

“That’s got a kick…!” Gose seemed to be having an equally difficult time withstanding the blow, so he leaped backward to save himself from its full force, using his spear to soften his landing. He may have had a large build, but he was clearly highly flexible, his movements quick, leaving little in the way of openings that Ayato could try to wrench open.

Even more pressing was the fact that whenever his spear, that Lost Lux, made contact with the Ser Veresta, the two weapons repelled each other with tremendous force. Not only that, but with each and every blow, the Ser Veresta seemed to cry out in immense pain.

By the looks of it, the Orga Lux seemed to be having an even harder time of it than its user.

The same, however, could be said about his opponent.

Sparks were already beginning to fly wildly from the core of Gose’s Lost Lux, and its brilliant, glowing spearhead looked to be growing unstable. Ayato doubted that it could withstand exchanging blows with the Ser Veresta for much longer.

Perhaps having noticed Ayato glancing at his weapon, Gose’s lips curled in a grin. “Oh, are you worried about it? How considerate. But what can I do, eh? Your little Ser Veresta’s supposed to be able to cut through just about anything. Of course it’s gonna hurt.”

“…Let me ask you again,” Ayato called out. “How did you get your hands on that Lost Lux?”

Even though the two weapons so violently repelled each other, it was Gose’s spear, with its considerable length, that held the advantage. Because the Lost Lux would always reach him before he could bring the Ser Veresta close to Gose, he was effectively forced to play defensively.

“How many times do I have to tell you? I’m just using the weapon they gave me. Sure, I had my doubts when I first got my

hands on it, but it ain't half bad. But I guess it ain't as all-powerful as they made it out to be either, though."

"But who gave it to you…? They should have told you how dangerous it is…!"

"Ah, no need to worry about that. This ain't that lady's Lost Lux —our staff have used the data on that one to make it more general-purpose… They got rid of all those useless functions and just boosted its output… Although, it still needed a few dozen people's worth of prana to activate it the first time around."

"…! If you knew that, how could you…?!"

"Hey, hey! Don't get yourself so worked up. Shouldn't you be more worried about what's right in front of you?" With that, flashing him a grin that didn't seem to contain even the slightest hint of malice, Gose pointed his weapon at the Ser Veresta. "If this were just any old Lux, you'd probably wreck it in a single blow. But now I've proved that the almighty Ser Veresta ain't all that."

"…It looks to me like yours has taken more damage than mine."

The Lost Lux might have been able to survive making contact with the Ser Veresta, but unlike the Orga Lux, it didn't look like it could hold out for much longer—indeed, Ayato suspected that even one more blow might end up being too much for it.

"Heh, you're right, of course… I guess it's about time I brought in a replacement, then," Gose said, pulling the activation body of yet another Lux from his pocket.

"Another one…?!"

As it activated before him, Ayato recoiled at the sight of yet another identical Lost Lux.

"I knew that one wouldn't be enough for your Ser Veresta. And if two won't do it, how about three? Or four? I can't afford to be frugal here." Gose lobbed a sneering grin his way as he readied his fresh weapon. "And stop calling them Lost Luxes. These days, we prefer to call them Lux Eaters!"

No sooner did Gose finish speaking than he lunged toward Ayato.

*"Ugh!"*

Ayato, unable to catch each blow of the three-stage attack with the Ser Veresta, tried to leap out of the way, but he wasn't fast enough. The weapon cut across his cheek, his flank, and his upper arm, deep enough to draw a noticeable amount of blood.

*"What a surprising development! Contestant Amagiri, one of the*

*tournament favorites, seems to be at a disadvantage! Zaharoula, does this mean we're looking at a major upset?"*

*"Hmm, I wonder. Amagiri still has the edge as far as raw specs and skill is concerned. But then again… Kevut is good."*

*"Good…?"*

*"Basically, he's more experienced, I guess—more familiar with these kinds of matches… He's probably used to fighting against stronger opponents."*

Ayato, for his part, had already come to the same conclusion.

As Zaharoula had pointed out, Ayato's raw strength was most likely superior. However, Gose seemed to excel in his ability to deceive his opponent—and he was remarkably capable of capitalizing on that ability. From the way he feinted, his timing when he leaped forward, and even the way he held his body, each and every one of his actions was almost impossible to properly read.

When Ayato thought he was trying to knock him off his feet, he would instead adjust his trajectory and shift into an upward lunge. When it looked like he was aiming for his chest, the next instant he would switch into a broad, overhead slash.

And whenever Ayato tried to counter, Gose would inevitably shift his fighting stance once more, taking away any momentary advantage he might have had.

And because of all that—

"What's wrong, Murakumo? We can keep playing cat and mouse like this, but something tells me you can't keep dodging me forever!"

Ayato used the palm of his hand to deflect a blunt-force strike from the reverse end of Gose's spear, then bent backward to dodge a follow-through sweeping slash—but his opponent, as if having read his movements, instead delivered an unexpectedly devastating kick.

*"Guh…!"*

Ayato focused his prana to withstand the blow, but the impact was so powerful that it threw him backward across the stage. It seemed that his opponent's skill at martial arts was also greater than he had initially let on.

Gose wasted no time in launching into a follow-through attack. With insufficient time to regain his fighting posture to evade, Ayato had no choice but to catch the strike with the Ser Veresta.

*“Urgk!”*

He was thrown back once more by the shock, but this time he managed to maintain his balance and land ready.

“Ah… Sorry, Ser Veresta,” he said to the Orga Lux gripped tightly in his hands.

The weapon responded with a slight vibration. There was no mistaking that it was in pain each time it made contact with that so-called Lux Eater, but Ayato knew it wasn’t about to give up, either. Indeed, he could sense something bordering on anger bubbling up from inside it.

Even so, neither could afford to blindly lay into a full-frontal attack.

*So this is what it feels like to fight as one with the Ser Veresta…*

Given that neither he nor his opponent could afford to cross swords with each other, Ayato was left with surprisingly few options. But while he understood that at an intellectual level, it was another matter entirely in the heat of battle.

“…I guess I’ve got no choice.”

Lamina Mortis was undoubtedly watching the match. Ayato had wanted to save this technique—one of several—for his eventual confrontation with him, and he hated having to reveal it so early, but it would all be for nothing if he lost this battle.

He let out a deep sigh, letting the Ser Veresta in his right hand droop down as he adjusted his upper body, lifting his center of mass and shifting his weight to the tips of his toes.

And then—

*“What’s this?! Contestant Amagiri’s closed his eyes in the heat of battle?!”*

“Hey, hey… What’s all this, then?”

Ayato, however, made no effort to respond to his opponent’s bewilderment, instead focusing his entire attention into a single point.

The state of *shiki*, the Amagiri Shinmei style’s perception-expanding technique, gave those who could master it the ability to sense their surroundings well enough that not being able to see would pose no hindrance—but this was an ever deeper, more developed mental state.

By pushing his concentration to its utmost limits, he could focus purely on his foe and his movements—allowing him to immediately sense Gose’s every move.

Every single one of those movements, everything from his breathing, to the beating of his heart, to the subtlest contractions of his muscles, appeared in that world of darkness as a steady stream of silence and motion. If his concentration was to falter for even the slightest of moments, however, that stream of continuous light would immediately dissipate. In order to prevent that from happening, he continued to push the boundaries of his awareness, as if he were sharpening a blade on a whetstone.

And then—

"You don't look like you've given up… Ah well. Let's see if you can—"

—at that very instant, his eyes still firmly shut, Ayato knew that Gose had come within range.

"Wha—?!"

There was no need for haste. He needed only to deliver the right blow to the right place.

A wide, gentle movement in that river of darkness.

Gose continued to rush forward, clearly intent on launching into a devastating assault. Ayato, however, moved barely enough to dodge it by a literal hair's breadth, and then, with a flash of the Ser Veresta—

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, Ultimate Technique—*Tsugomori!*"

When Ayato opened his eyes, Gose's school crest lay broken on the ground, shorn into two clean halves.

*"End of battle! Winner: Ayato Amagiri!"*

"Ha-ha… Seriously…?" Gose wore a look of mute astonishment as the automated voice announced the conclusion of the match.

One more second of silence passed before the entire stadium erupted into deafening applause.

*"What a stunning end to the opening match! I think that was much harder fought than many of us predicted, but Contestant Amagiri pulled through to snatch victory in the end!"*

*"Yep, that was pretty impressive. I guess it was worth coming here, after all."*

Mico's voice, echoing across the arena, sounded somehow relieved, while Zaharoula's, on the other hand, could be described

only as vaguely satisfied.

"Argh, you got me," Gose called out. He seemed surprisingly indifferent to the match's outcome. "I thought I had you up until that last move. What kind of trick was that? Some kind of ultrahigh-precision counter or something?"

"Something like that." Ayato's reply was noncommittal. If he could help it, he didn't want to reveal any more than he already had.

"Seems to me like it all went downhill when you changed your stance, when you stopped using that old-fashioned posture, sticking close to the ground. You switched to one that prioritized movement, right?"

"…"

Ayato didn't answer.

Gose, it seemed, had a *very* good eye.

The Amagiri Shinmei style's Ultimate Technique *Tsugomori* was essentially the perfect countermove, made possible by a complete and total awareness of one's opponent's every action—whether defense, offense, or evasion—and realized as a single, unerringly accurate strike. Those qualities made it perfect for dealing with Gose's normally unpredictable feints.

Moreover, there was no fixed form in its application—although, this was common to all of the Amagiri Shinmei style's Ultimate Techniques, which strove toward abstract ideals much more than they did to rote learning.

As such, even if an opponent was to see him use it once, they wouldn't be able to fully prepare themselves to deal with it a second time. That said, Ayato suspected that a fighter of Gose's ability wouldn't allow themselves to easily fall victim to the same trick too many times.

The same applied, of course, to Lamina Mortis.

"Heh, well, I guess it's done with. A loss is a loss. It was fun." Gose flashed him a carefree grin and, with a wave of his hand over his shoulder, made his departure.

"Ah…," Ayato began to call out after him, before stopping himself.

He had many questions that he wanted to ask about those Lost Luxes, but he suspected that Gose wouldn't be able to answer them.

"Phew… But if this is what the first match ended up being like, I'm going to have to start planning a bit better for the others…"

He had known it from the beginning, at a certain level, but it was clear to him now that winning the Lindvolus would be no easy feat.

The opening match had made that perfectly obvious.

*

When Gose returned to the gate leading back to his prep room, a small figure stood leaning against the wall waiting for him.

"I told you, didn't I? He's strong."

"Oh? So you came after all?" he answered.

"When it comes to this city, I *am* your senior."

The figure was hooded, making it impossible for Gose to read the person's expression.

"But for our top ace to lose his first match… That's a real shame."

"Heh, what can I say?" he replied. "I thought getting assigned to *him* in the opening match was too good to be true. I guess we were outdone, huh?"

The only possible explanation was that someone in the Festa Executive Committee had seen through Gose's identity and sought to manipulate the situation to their own advantage.

"Well, at least you still know how to pull the wool over people's eyes. You didn't really have any other Lux Eaters left, did you?"

"Heh, they *are* priceless," Gose replied with a dauntless grin.

He may have suggested to Ayato that he had readied three or four of the weapons, but in reality, he had only ever had two.

"You had me worried about losing the second one there. The plan is, after all, for me to take possession of it."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Gose muttered, tossing its activation body to the hooded figure. "We'd better get out of here. Who knows how quickly the city guard will get here? I guess it's time to say good-bye to this place, huh?"

He had no doubt attracted significant attention to himself, what with using that Lost Lux so blatantly in public.

"Indeed. The warm-up's over. We'll take care of the main event." The figure hid the Lux's activation body deep in its cloak as the two began to head down the corridor in the opposite direction of Gose's prep room.

Azdaja had given Gose two orders.

The first was to enter the Lindvolus and eliminate as many star players as he could. Having to do so was a nuisance, of course, but work was work, and so he had endeavored to carry out his instructions to the letter, no matter how petty they were.

And the second one—

"By the way," the figure called out to him, "it still isn't clear what this Golden Bough Alliance is plotting. I'm grateful you've started to help. I was at my limits trying to sound them out by myself."

"This whole city's swarming with security, what with the Concordia coming up. It's going to be hard for us to stay in the shadows."

Lately, rumors of the Golden Bough Alliance's activities were beginning to spread even in the underground society in which Gose and Azdaja operated.

As far as Azdaja was concerned, the organization wanted to find out what kind of effect the Golden Bough Alliance's plans might have on the foundations.

Depending on what precisely the group's goals were, they might even be inclined to cooperate.

And, of course, the opposite might be true as well.

"We'd better get to work, then. Take a look around the docks, Gose. There's been a lot of freight coming into port over the past few days. Nothing's stood out so far, but there's definitely something fishy about it all."

"Yeah, yeah, got it. You sure drive your people hard, huh, Ruf?"

Conversing like that, the pair's hushed voices faded away into silence as they disappeared into the darkness of the corridor.

# CHAPTER 5
# THE PRELIMINARIES II

Out of all of Asterisk's six schools, Le Wolfe Black Institute boasted the greatest number of champions in the Lindvolus, the famed Festa of Festas. There were several factors contributing to that, but the simplest explanation was simply that only those who were already strong came to Le Wolfe in the first place.

Indeed, those who enrolled at Le Wolfe came not for friendship, nor for beauty, nor arms, nor wisdom, nor fame—but to attain power or, at the very least, to experience some taste of it (although, it couldn't be denied that, as a result, there were also those who, crashing out of this fierce contest, turned to depravity and crime).

The twin swords, the emblem of Le Wolfe's militaristic rule inscribed on each and every student's school crest, was the very soul of the institution and reflective of the ferocity of the struggle for supremacy. Moreover, Le Wolfe was famous for being the harshest of Asterisk's six schools, with a tempestuous and rapid turnover of Page Ones—so much so that those who climbed the ranks to number one were usually torn down by their rivals almost overnight.

Now, however, that state of affairs was a thing of the past.

That was because, for several years now, Le Wolfe's number one position—strictly speaking, its top-two positions—had remained completely static.

Orphelia Landlufen—the Witch of Solitary Venom, alias Erenshkigal—had occupied the highest throne, while Rodolfo Zoppo—the Mage of the Crushing Star, alias Basadone—had remained the number two. Both had resisted all would-be challengers.

“Ha-ha-ha! So this is what it’s like! I guess it ain’t half bad, taking center stage every now and then!” Rodolfo said in good humor as he glanced up at the dazzling lights illuminating the Canopus Dome.

With his combed-down red hair and massive build, and his brilliant-white teeth peeking through his puckered grin, his whole body seemed to be giving off the fragrance of raw vitality.

*“Yahoo! Everyone watching, feast your eyes! Rodolfo Zoppo has entered the stage!”*

That overly excited voice was ABC’s Christie Baudouin, the announcer covering the matches at the Canopus Dome. With her forthright and enthusiastic manner of speaking, and above all, her good looks and excessively revealing outfits, she had recently shot up in popularity throughout the city. Even now, in the middle of winter, her attire, little more than a swimsuit, was enough to make one question her sanity.

Still, if there had to be a live commentary, as far as Rodolfo was concerned, he wanted it to be as energetic as possible.

*“Despite his renown as Le Wolfe’s strongest-ever number two, this is Rodolfo’s first time entering the Festa! Word on the street has it that he’s the head of a brutal mafia group operating out of the Rotlicht, so just what can we expect from this ferocious Dante now that he’s finally entered the struggle?!”*

“*Aaaaaah! You shouldn’t say that, Christie…!*” the flustered voice of the analyst interrupted.

From what he had heard, that weak-minded man providing the analysis had made it to the top four in a different Lindvolus over a decade ago, but Rodolfo paid him no mind.

*And apparently, the Sirius Dome gets good old Z to do their analysis… Talk about a fated gathering!*

He let loose a low growl from deep in his throat as he let his thoughts flow back to the past—to his comrades with whom he had competed during his childhood years at the Institute.

*First that bastard D, then P, and now Z. It’s almost enough to make me tear up.*

At the Institute, only those who had achieved exemplary results were permitted to take on names of their own—although, technically, they were initials rather than names per se. Rodolfo, lauded as the Institute’s greatest masterpiece, had been known at the time as R.

There were others formerly from the Institute here in Asterisk, but he only knew about those who had been crowned with initials of their own.

"…Rodolfo Zoppo!" came a sharp voice, disturbing his recollections.

Currently standing in front of him was a young man wearing a Jie Long uniform, his eyes seething with rage as he glared at him.

"Hey, hey, what's all this? You got a grudge or something?"

"I do," the young man from Jie Long—Zimo, his name was, if Rodolfo remembered correctly, their twenty-fifth-ranked fighter—answered curtly, his expression dead serious. With his well-toned, bandana-clad figure, he was practically the prototypical image of a Jie Long martial artist.

"Ha-ha! I see, I see! That's too bad!" Rodolfo exclaimed, laughing him off. "Glare at me all you want! You ain't gonna be able to do no more than that!"

At this, Zimo's expression only grew increasingly severe. "… You aren't even going to ask me why?"

"What would be the point? People have been throwing shade at me for as long as I can remember. There's no way I can remember them all! But if you wanna tell me, I ain't gonna stop you!"

Zimo let out a deep sigh before shaking his head. "So that's the kind of man you are… In that case, you can answer this for my sake. You remember the dispute that your Omo Nero had with the Jianghu Group, no?"

"Huh? When are we talking about? We've got problems with those guys pretty much every day!"

Like Rodolfo's Omo Nero, the Jianghu Group was a mafia society operating out of the Rotlicht. Their members mostly came from Jie Long, and they weren't particularly large-scale in their operations, but the Omo Nero had been involved in skirmishes with them on several occasions.

"Then what about the man who was reckless enough to try to attack you directly during the last one?"

Finally, Rodolfo remembered: Some time ago, there had been a rather large confrontation in a corner of the redevelopment area, where one individual had charged head-on into his escort.

"Ah, right! That little brat! He had more guts than most of you Jianghu clowns! Right, so you're telling me he's your buddy or something?"

"…That unworthy fool is my brother." His voice low, as if smothering his emotions, Zimo reached for his weapons.

They weren't Luxes, but rather a pair of circular blades roughly fifteen inches in diameter—legendary Chinese throwing weapons known as universe rings.

Rodolfo, on the other hand, merely crossed his arms. "Oh, your brother. I see. A pity. If he were on my side, I think we'd get along pretty well. But you know what it's like. We do them in one day, they do us in the next. Seems to me you ain't got no right to criticize what goes on in our world. And you ain't exactly being reasonable, hating on me for it."

"Perhaps not. Maybe he just lost his way and succumbed to banditry. But even so… Despite that, for you to…!" Zimo paused here, clenching his teeth as if to stop the words from overflowing from his lips.

"What's this? I'm grateful. He gave me a bit of fun. Anyone who knows how to have a bit of fun is a good guy. That's why I spared his life. Although, I guess I might have left him in a few pieces."

Rodolfo broke into a wide grin, flashing Zimo his bone-white teeth.

"Why, you…!"

*"Lindvolus Block B, Round 1, Match 1—begin!"*

The same instant that Zimo began to cry out in rage, a cool, metallic voice emanated from their school crests, announcing the beginning of the match.

"This must be fate, getting put up against you in the first round! I'll give you your just reward, demon!" With that, Zimo leaped for him, twisting through the air, weapon ready. "*Pò!*" he cried out, using all his momentum to hurl his ringed blade straight at him.

The next moment, Rodolfo was buffeted by what felt like a wall of solid air, the iron ring still flying toward him.

"Eh?!"

While he had been taken by surprise, he was still able to avoid the flying projectile without receiving so much as a scratch—although, the force of the shock wave had been enough to tear several long gashes through the sleeves of his uniform. He couldn't help but wonder what would have been the outcome had Zimo landed a direct hit.

“It’s not over! Take this!” his opponent cried out again, this time casting the ringed blade still clasped in his left hand.

On top of that, the previous ring was still drawing a wide arc through the air, coming around like a boomerang. Zimo was evidently employing a pincer attack, trying to strike him from two fronts at incredibly high speed.

Even so, Rodolfo’s lips began to curl, itching with excitement. “Ha-ha! What’s this? I didn’t see that coming!”

As he stepped aside, lightly dodging the two oncoming projectiles as they flew past each other, the huge crowd in the galleries surrounding the stadium broke into a deafening applause.

*“Ngh…!”* Zimo made a vexed expression as he reached to catch the returning ring—although, from the outside, there didn’t appear to be any safe way to clutch the thing. The force of the impact was enough to spin him around, but he did manage to retrieve it.

“I see, so you can’t even handle that toy of yours properly yet. And what the heck is that thing? It sure doesn’t look like an Orga Lux.”

Having said that, Rodolfo found it hard to believe that just any old metal ring would have that amount of power.

For one thing, the weapon’s shock wave had been enough to gouge a path through the floor of the stage along its trajectory.

“…This is the Hunnongquan, a sage tool created by my master, the Ban’yuu Tenra. It’s one of Jie Long’s most valued treasures, normally never permitted to be taken off campus. But my master has given me special permission this time. Rodolfo, I will take my vengeance on you!”

“Oh, so it’s one of those sage tools?”

He had, of course, heard rumors about the weapons, but this was his first time ever seeing one in person.

“Sounds good! This’ll be fun!”

“Shut up!” Zimo released the ringed weapon once more, sending a shock wave careening wildly across the stage.

*“Wow! This guy’s impressive! Those ferocious attacks aren’t cutting through the wind so much as they’re gouging through the air itself! Rodolfo’s been put on the defensive, and it doesn’t look like he can do anything about it! Maybe the great Basadone isn’t everything rumor says he is?! But then again, isn’t it pretty cowardly of Zimo to rely solely on ranged weapons?!”*

*“Well, it would be suicide for him to try his luck with close combat.*

*I think pretty much anyone would want to rely on ranged attacks with this opponent. Be that as it may, though, that destructive power is beyond what I was expecting…"*

Indeed. Just as the commentator had said, anyone who knew even the slightest thing about Rodolfo would know enough not to get within his attack range. That was why his opponents were always trying to lay into him from a distance—although, he had to admit that this Zimo guy was doing a better job of it than most. At the very least, it was a refreshing change of pace from the usual sniping from faraway buildings or having countless projectiles hurled at him by a mob of assailants.

And yet…

"If all you've got is speed, it's gonna get all the harder for you to win now that I know your shtick! Don't tell me this is it?"

He had already seen through his opponent's use of this Hunnongquan. The trajectories of throwing weapons were, after all, particularly easy to read, and while their users could generally vary their attack patterns to one extent or another, they simply couldn't compare to the freedom of movement, speed, or sheer power of a Rect Lux.

"In that case, how about this…?!" Zimo reached behind his back with both arms, this time throwing two weapons simultaneously, making a total of three.

Rodolfo had no difficulty dodging the attack coming from left and right—but then, the two weapons began orbiting around him in a wide ellipse several meters in diameter. He was effectively caged in, and he had no idea how the man had done it.

The remaining blade flew back into Zimo's hand, but he merely used its momentum to cast it once more in Rodolfo's direction.

"Oh-ho, this ain't good…!"

"You can't run now!" Zimo cried out victoriously.

Indeed, with the two other flying disks still caging him in, he simply didn't have enough space to maneuver.

"…Well, I guess I've got no choice, then," he grumbled, focusing his prana to withstand the oncoming shock wave and reaching to seize the approaching projectile in the palm of his hand.

Naturally, the momentum felt like it might send him flying backward, but he controlled the rotation of his body the same way Zimo had and cast it back straight into the other two disks swirling around him.

*“Yargh!”*

“Wha—?!”

The result when the weapons collided with each other was exactly as he had expected.

“Ha-ha! These sage tools of yours are more fragile than I thought!” He scoffed as he looked down at the broken fragments of the Hunnongquan.

“—! Impossible… How did you…?” Zimo, completely stupefied, couldn’t even finish his sentence.

“Eh? If *you* can do it, what made you think *I* couldn’t? You already showed me everything there is to it.”

“Don’t tell me, you worked out how to do it through observation alone…?”

“Forget about that,” Rodolfo continued, ignoring his foe’s question. “I’m guessing you ain’t got any more of those sage tools lying around here, right? Well, it was fun! I’ll be looking forward to the next one!” Rodolfo flashed his teeth once more in a wide grin as he spread open his hands.

“…!” Zimo, grinding his teeth in frustration, reached into his belt, pulling out a gun-shaped Lux.

“…What’s that supposed to be?”

Rodolfo’s shoulders slumped in disappointment at the sight of what was no doubt his foe’s backup Lux.

“Ah… So you *are* all out, huh?”

“Quiet, fiend!” Zimo cried, firing off first one bullet of light, then another.

Rodolfo, however, brushed them all aside single-handedly, before flicking a mental switch.

His goal in life was to enjoy things as much as possible. To live life to the fullest, he wanted nothing more than to increase the amount of fun he had during each and every single day. It didn’t matter whether that meant satiating oneself with delicious food, being in the embrace of a good woman, or indulging in the thrill of gambling or of battle—the important thing was to have the ability to change one’s viewpoint no matter the situation so that one could have the most fun.

He had even been able to enjoy his defeat against Orphelia Landlufen that one time he had fought against her in an official ranking match. After all, she had been the first person he had ever met who was clearly stronger than he himself was, and so for the

first time in his life, he had discovered a goal that he could strive to surpass.

Which was why, now that it had become clear he wouldn't get any more of a thrill from his current situation, the only thing left to do was shake things up and have a different kind of fun.

"Well then, my turn," he said, removing the activation body of his Rect Lux from the holder at his waist.

*"Wh-what's this?! It's huge! Too huge! Rodolfo's packing a Rect Lux with* three *whole terminals?! And they're all ultra-heavyweight types?!"*

*"Hmm, Rect Luxes are supposed to be more difficult to handle the larger they are…"*

Rodolfo's favorite Rect Lux was specially designed, each glowing blade more than a meter in length.

In the general awareness, Rect Luxes were practically synonymous with the Nova Spina belonging to Seidoukan Academy's Glühen Rose. Controlling six terminals simultaneously, however, required an extraordinary level of spatial perception, and Rodolfo wasn't too vain to admit that this ability was beyond him.

When it came to oversized terminals like his own, however, what was required wasn't spatial perception so much as a fine control over one's prana. That was where his own skills lay, and so he'd had this new Rect Lux with three superpowered terminals custom-built to suit himself. The main unit was stored in the bracelet attached to his wrist so it wouldn't interfere with his Dante abilities should he wish to use them both simultaneously. After all, he preferred to use his own abilities rather than rely on weapons.

"Heh, let's have some fun!" he bellowed, swinging his arm and sending the three remote terminals hurtling downward toward Zimo all at once.

"Tch!"

As he would have expected from one of Jie Long's ranked fighters, his opponent's movements were first-class. Like an acrobat, he continued to leap out of the way of the weapons flying toward him from every possible direction, firing off burst after burst with his handgun-shaped Lux at each terminal as it made its approach—although, of course, his own weapon was little more than a peashooter against Rodolfo's Rect Lux.

"Haah… Haah… *Urgh!*"

It wasn't long before one of those remote terminals fell upon his now raggedly breathing opponent, slicing his handgun-shaped Lux

clean in two.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You're unarmed! What're you gonna do now, Mr. Martial Artist?" Rodolfo laughed, recalling all three of his remote terminals.

For a split second, Zimo stared back at him with fear in his eyes, but he quickly strengthened his resolve, adopting once more his fighting posture. "Even if I've exhausted all other options, I still have my fists!"

"Heh, let's see what you've got, then!"

"I'm coming for you!" Zimo cried out, kicking himself up off the ground and flying toward him, putting the strength of his whole body into his fist as it came crashing straight into Rodolfo's abdomen.

However—

"…What now? Did you just do something?"

"Ngh—?!" A look of stunned horror spread across his opponent's face.

If a martial artist trained at Jie Long was to focus his prana into his attack, not even Rodolfo would have been able to come out without sustaining heavy damage.

That was a simple fact.

*"A-arghhhhhhhhh!"*

Zimo let loose an ear-splitting war cry, lashing out with a wild tempest of punches and vicious kicks, but not a single one of them was able to injure Rodolfo in any way.

That was because his ability, as a Dante, allowed him full control over the flow of all prana within a fixed range—even that which belonged to someone else.

Jie Long's martial artists excelled at concentrating their prana in their fists or legs to increase their offensive power—but Rodolfo, for his part, could merely dispel that prana, rendering their attacks no stronger than any other punch or kick. Of course, compared to the attacks of an average person, they were still impressive, but when he used his own prana to increase his defense, they had little effect on him whatsoever.

*"Ugh…! A-argh…!"*

It wasn't long before Zimo, exhausted, fell to his knees with a soft thud.

"Oh? You look like you've had enough. You wanna finish it, then?" Rodolfo taunted with a grin.

Zimo merely stared up at him, his eyes filled with abject despair.

Tormenting the weak, trampling them down—yep, he was in a good mood, all right.

"It's been more fun than I had expected," he said, detonating an explosion that engulfed Zimo's whole body.

Strictly speaking, he had taken control of his foe's prana and incited it to explode. Given that the natural arrangement of one's prana worked to protect one's life, even if the person in question had happened to fall unconscious, this kind of phenomenon shouldn't have even been possible. Rodolfo, however, had the power to make it so.

*That* was why people feared him.

*That* was why they whispered among themselves that no Genestella could ever hope to defeat him.

*"End of battle! Winner: Rodolfo Zoppo!"*

*

"Hmm, so Zimo lost. Well, I did expect as much." Xinglou, looking impossibly small in her overly large chair, resting her chin in her hands as she watched the match through an air-window in Jie Long Seventh Institute's special viewing lounge at the Procyon Dome, let out a quiet sigh.

"This is most disappointing. Especially after you allowed us to use such a precious sage tool… It's inexcusable. As the head of the Wood sect, please accept my deepest apologies, master." Hufeng, at her side, could do nothing more than bow his head in shame.

After all, Zimo belonged to the Wood sect and was a particularly promising student of his. Hufeng, too, had to bear some degree of responsibility for this outcome.

"Don't fret. Putting those made by the first or second generation aside, my *sengu* are little more the petty trifles."

Hufeng breathed a sigh of relief at seeing just how disinterested Xinglou seemed to be with it all. The one who was no doubt going to be the most worried about having lost the *sengu* was Zimo himself. From what Hufeng had heard, he had merely lost consciousness, and his life wasn't in any kind of grave danger, but there was no mistaking that he would have to be hospitalized for

some time. The very least Hufeng could do to lighten the burden was to tell him that Xinglou didn't seem to hold the loss against him.

"More importantly, that Rodolfo Zoppo is formidable," Xinglou said. "His abilities as a Dante are impressive enough, but on top of that, his physical prowess, battle sense, and fighting techniques are a cut above the rest, too. You only see that kind of prodigy once in a century."

"Oh? He must be the real thing if you're willing to say that." Cecily, waiting by Xinglou's other side, was staring at her in wide-eyed surprise.

Hufeng, for his part, didn't want to have to admit it, but it seemed undeniable at this point that Rodolfo's strength really was overwhelming. He doubted that even he would have much chance of victory were he to fight the man himself. At any rate, Jie Long's martial artists were probably the most ill-suited to face him.

"…Would Elder Brother be able to defeat him?" he asked warily.

At this, Xinglou crossed her arms, falling deep into thought. "Hmm, that's hard to say. If skill were the only thing that mattered, victory would be Xiaohui's. But I doubt that his techniques will be enough to resist this Rodolfo Zoppo's abilities. More importantly, however… I can't tell how strong that man really is."

"Oh…"

"He'll be back in time, right…? Elder Brother, I mean," Cecily asked with a strained smile.

Xiaohui had informed them all that he would be back in Asterisk before the beginning of the Lindvolus, but he still hadn't returned from his travels to improve his skills.

His match was tomorrow. At this rate, he would end up forfeiting by default.

"He could at least have taken a phone with him…"

But of course, it was Xiaohui himself who refused to possess anything that they might use to contact him, arguing that such devices would only interfere with his training.

"Well, if he doesn't make it, that will just be that. Besides… If the opponent is this Rodolfo Zoppo, this one would be more appropriate."

Taken somewhat aback by Xinglou's words, Hufeng glanced down toward the stage, only to catch sight of a black-haired woman

wearing a patterned shawl over her Jie Long uniform.

"Ah, she's out! You show 'em, Fuyuka!" Cecily, having noticed her also, raised her voice in support.

*"Now, then! Our next match kicking off Block Y is between Jie Long's number three, the Witch of Dharani, Contestant Fuyuka Umenokouji, and Allekant's number thirty-two, Aegaeon, Contestant Sanjeev Jain!"*

*"There's no mistaking that the highest places in Jie Long's rankings are shrouded in mystery. Incidentally, their number one has never entered the Festa and is probably too young to do so anyway."*

*"But Jie Long's number two, Contestant Xiaohui Wu did pretty well in the Gryps and is entering again this year, too! It looks like Jie Long's veil of secrecy is finally being pulled back! I'm looking forward to it!"*

At the Procyon Dome, the cheerful commentary and analysis was being delivered by Nana Andersen from ABC and Chitose Sakon, a former student from Allekant. Normally, the commentary was provided by former contestants who themselves had done well in the Festa, but Chitose, for some reason, was an exception to that rule.

*"Her opponent, Contestant Jain from Allekant, belongs to Ferrovius's practical class. I wonder whether he'll be able to use that new-and-improved Centimani Device of his to stage an upset?"*

"Ugh…"

"Wow…"

So he had a Centimani Device.

As soon as they heard those words, both Hufeng's and Cecily's faces clouded over.

"Oh-ho! I see, I see! That must bring back memories!" Xinglou said in jest.

"…We were still young, back then."

"We'd win, if we were to face it again today."

For Hufeng and Cecily, on the other hand, that was a sensitive topic.

Before coming under Xinglou's wing, their opponents as tag partners in the championship match of the Phoenix had been students from Allekant armed with Centimani Devices. Hufeng still hadn't forgotten the humiliation of fighting in vain just to wind up in second place.

*I wonder how Fuyuka will fare against that thing…*

To tell the truth, Hufeng still hadn't seen any of Fuyuka's

millennia-old techniques for himself.

Techniques that had allowed her to land a blow on Xinglou herself.

He could only lean forward in anticipation as he waited to witness her true power.

*

"May I say something before we begin, Miss?" called the young dark-skinned man to his opponent. Sanjeev, his name was; he had a cool demeanor and frameless glasses.

Fuyuka raised a hand to her cheek, her head tilted slightly to one side, before clearing her throat and answering slowly: "Is something the matter?"

"We in Ferrovius are confident that our newest Centimani Device is our greatest masterpiece yet. We may be denounced as cowards for employing it, but we are prepared to face that outcome. We understand if you end up resenting us."

"Well, well, thank you for your most gracious consideration," Fuyuka returned with a sweet smile, appearing not the slightest bit worried.

Sanjeev cleared his throat before continuing. "Ahem…! Well, I understand if you don't yet believe me. I may not have a lot of data on you, but standing here now, I think that I can deduce a rough estimate of your abilities. In a normal one-on-one contest, I suspect that it would be impossible for me to win against you."

He paused there, activating the Device.

And with that, eight metal appendages emerged from the backup unit fastened to his back. Half of them were equipped with long-range gun Luxes, while the remaining four were armed with a sword, a lance, and two other forms of close-range Luxes.

"Our previous Centimani Devices allowed for no more than two additional auxiliary limbs and were little more than support tools. With this new design, however, we have managed to bypass the previous limitations by directly augmenting the user through neural surgery. This unit now functions as a natural extension of my body."

The Centimani Device had several advantages over the projects of other researchers at Allekant, not the least of which being that it didn't interfere with its user's latent abilities. Ernesta's and

Camilla's puppets, for instance, competed autonomously in the tournament as substitute fighters, while Narcisse's state-of-the-art powered combat suits had failed to achieve wide use among Genestella precisely because of their considerable limitations.

However, with the help of this new Centimani Device, it was possible to achieve a numerical advantage while still maintaining the use of one's individual abilities. With the units providing eight additional arms, altogether its user was left with ten operational limbs capable of carrying armaments, and so the Centimani Device effectively allowed one fighter to operate as if they were a full team of five. It went without saying that this gave its user an incredible advantage.

Moreover, with no chance for variance in the actions or responses of those appendages, the team that they comprised was all but perfect.

"Oh, I'm quivering in my boots. If only I could flee from that terrifying contraption." Fuyuka's friendly grin didn't falter for a second.

"…Very well," Sanjeev replied, the corners of his lips twitching as he spoke. "Let's see just how long you can maintain that sense of composure, Miss."

*"Lindvolus Block Y, Round 1, Match 1—begin!"*

With the signal administered to begin the match, Sanjeev aimed each of his gun-wielding arms toward his opponent. Given their flexibility and lack of any notable joints, it was perhaps more appropriate, he mused, to think of them as tentacles.

"Hmm, it certainly wouldn't be fair for you to attack me from any direction. Perhaps I'll call in a friend, too?" Fuyuka said, pulling a folding fan from her breast pocket.

At first sight, it appeared like any other, but when Sanjeev looked closely, he could see that there were complex patterns and what looked like incantations covering its entire surface.

*No… Wait! It's a spell charm! She hasn't enchanted it—the whole thing's a spell charm…!*

It was the kind of support tool that Jie Long's *daoshi* were fond of using. Sanjeev had no idea just what kind of charm it was, but he doubted that he wanted to find out. He would have to settle this before it activated.

“Fire!” he cried as five of his Lux arms began to let loose with a barrage of glowing bullets.

However—

That storm of projectiles merely swept right past Fuyuka, her body wavering in the air like flames.

“An illusion?! But when could she have…?!”

He wasted no time in scanning his surroundings, only to find his opponent standing calmly in his blind spot, holding her fan outstretched in the middle of what looked almost like some kind of dance.

*“Jí jí rú lǜ lìng, chì!”*

Her voice echoed gracefully across the stage—and with it, a great magic circle fuming with white smoke opened upon the ground.

The next moment—

“What…?!”

At the sight of the extraordinary monsters emerging from that cloud of smoke, Sanjeev fell flat to his knees, his strength having deserted him. They resembled, in some respects, gigantic crows, albeit they were possessed of only one eye, were robed in armored exoskeletons, and had huge maws lined with row upon row of terribly sharp fangs… And they kept coming, one after the other, until there must have been at least a hundred.

“Wh-wha—?!”

“…Aren’t they just adorable, my little *shikigami*?” Fuyuka chuckled as her conjured creations continued to emerge from the cloud.

It was clear enough by looking at them that each of those monsters moved by its own will. Fuyuka wasn’t merely manipulating them.

“C-coward! This is against the rules! This kind of thing can’t be allowed!” he screamed.

The monsters continued to approach, however, quickly lunging toward the arms of the Centimani Device. He was clearly outnumbered and overpowered, and before he knew it, the creatures had torn each and every arm of the device to pieces.

“D-d-don’t come any closer! Stay back!”

Still on the ground, Sanjeev frantically retreated on his hands and knees, until he found himself backed into a corner of the stage.

*“Contestant Jain just accused Contestant Umenokouji of a rule*

*violation…but I wonder? Chitose, what do you think?"*

*"There haven't been many summoners in Asterisk's history. The most recognizable is probably Gustave Malraux, probably more famous for his involvement in the Jade Twilight Incident. However, since the creatures are summoned by the user's own abilities, there's no real rule violation here, even if they're capable of moving by themselves."*

*"I thought so! Sorry about that, Contestant Jain!"*

"Th-that can't be…!" Sanjeev muttered in shock.

Fuyuka, still wearing her sickly sweet smile, began to wave her hand. "Now, now, Mr. Allekant—pandemonium awaits," she whispered, her voice ringing like small bells.

Hufeng swallowed hard as he watched Fuyuka's monsters all but devour Sanjeev. "So this is what Umenokouji's secret abilities are like…"

It was certainly an astounding technique—but even if it did require the assistance of a charm to make it take effect, it clearly wasn't the work of any normal human.

That was the only way he could think to describe it.

"It's no more than an intimidating display," Xinglou said beside him, her voice stern. "The Umenokouji lineage certainly does specialize in summoning and making use of *shikigami*, but those things that she's fashioned now don't amount to much."

"I—I didn't realize…"

"If she were to try the same trick against Ayato Amagiri, he would dispel them all with that Ser Veresta of his in a split second. I hope you weren't thinking that *I* fell victim to such a base trick?"

"N-not at all! I would never…!" Hufeng shook his head in denial.

When looked at individually, those summoned creatures—the *shikigami*—didn't look particularly powerful. Even so, Hufeng sincerely doubted that even several hundred attacking simultaneously would pose a threat to Xinglou.

"Well, speaking as someone who's studied *seisenjutsu* for as long as I have, they look impressive enough to *me*," Cecily added. "But I imagine she's still got an ace up her sleeve."

"An ace, you say?" Xinglou replied, breaking out into a grin. "Heh-heh-heh! That would be Umenokouji's ultimate *shikigami*, passed down for more than a thousand years—the Meidouki."

# CHAPTER 6
# THE PRELIMINARIES III

Even among Seidoukan Academy's Orga Luxes, the Serpent Blade Ororomunt was known for being especially dangerous to wield and was commonly referred to as the Cursed Sword. The weapon's brilliant fang-like blade, constantly expanding and contracting like a bellows, possessed a poison that could render its victims delirious with even the slightest scratch. But more than that, its most dangerous quality was unmistakably the cost of using it.

Upon activating it, its user would be assailed by an irresistible drug-like euphoria, to such an extent that its previous wielders had each become so dependent on it that they had taken to using it even outside of battle. However, while activated, it would eat away at its user's prana little by little, until finally devouring them completely and reducing them to a completely weakened state.

Moreover, while its former users could recover if they stayed away from the weapon for a long enough time, most of them, unable to resist the pull of their dependency on it, sought it out once again, attacking its new user and snatching it away for themselves—this state of affairs wasn't helped by the fact that the Orga Lux could achieve a high compatibility rating with almost anyone, and so it was hardly ever without a user. It was often said that the first curse to befall each new user of the Serpent Blade Ororomunt was the need to defeat its previous wielder.

Its current user, Seidoukan Academy's third-ranked fighter Feardorcha O'Neill, the Ringed Serpent King, Cuélebre, had held on to that Cursed Sword for close to four years now and had yet to be defeated by it.

“Keh… Talk about a downer,” Feardorcha said vacantly as he brushed back his long chestnut-colored hair. He was unhealthily gaunt, his eyes alone blazing with intensity.

The Serpent Blade Ororomunt’s cost came in two forms—an overwhelmingly uplifting sense of exaltation or a deep, quiet sense of rapture—but there was no way of telling which it would be at any given occasion until the weapon was activated.

“…Ah, today’s another wonderful day, Ororomunt.” Feardorcha sighed, his eyes narrowing as the dry, rasping sound emanating from its glowing blade enveloped him.

Of course, one’s affinity with an Orga Lux couldn’t be measured by their compatibility rating alone. Just as with the relationship that Seidoukan Academy’s Claudia Enfield had with the Pan-Dora, or Gallardworth’s former Pendragon, Ernest Fairclough, had with the Lei-Glems, especially proficient users of any Orga Lux had their own little tricks for dealing with their concomitant costs. Feardorcha was no exception on that front.

And that was because he knew: The Serpent Blade Ororomunt was simply lonely. It merely sought to develop a bond with its user and hold on to that bond at any price.

That was why he could immerse himself in that sense of euphoria without drowning. And he regulated his usage of it, setting daily limits on how long he allowed himself to bathe in its warmth. By doing so, he could remain close to the Orga Lux for as long as possible. Because Feardorcha O’Neill loved the Ororomunt—just as the Ororomunt loved him.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh! Oh dear, how splendid! And here I was thinking I’d have to wait a bit longer before facing an Orga Lux!” called out the woman standing across the stage, staring back at him with an ominous smile. His opponent, dressed in a white Allekant lab coat, was long-limbed with a thin build, her upturned eyes peeking through her chunky glasses, and was wearing some kind of device that resembled a pair of headphones over her shoulder-length hair.

Her name, if he remembered correctly, was—

*“And here we are, about to get underway! Zaharoula, isn’t Contestant Rowlands part of Allekant’s research class? What should we expect from her in this contest against the Serpent Blade Ororomunt?”*

*“Among meteoric engineering researchers, Magnum Opus is something of a prodigy. But I have to admit, I wouldn’t have expected*

*her to have entered the tournament herself like this…"*

Right. Rowlands. Hilda Jane Rowlands.

Feardorcha had done some basic research into his opponent, and she did indeed seem to be more of a researcher than a fighter. She was even the top of some faction called Tenorio or something like that. It wasn't unheard of for members of Allekant's research classes to enter the Festa—Team Androcles at the last Gryps was one such example—but at the very least, Hilda didn't seem to have any such experience in real-life combat.

But—

"…Whatever."

—he didn't have any real interest in her.

Or perhaps more precisely, Feardorcha had no real interest in anything except the Ororomunt. The only real thoughts occupying his head were his need to win this tournament and using his wish to claim the Ororomunt for his own.

No matter who his opponent was, all it would take would be one strike of the Serpent Blade, and the battle would be won. After all, his Orga Lux, with its ever-changing form, was capable of striking from any angle from a full 360 degrees and so could slip through the defenses of even the most proficient foe.

"Ah, it looks like the Skill Installation Device still hasn't been properly configured. I suppose I'll have to use its lowest power level," Hilda seemed to murmur to herself as she tapped the headphone-like device on her head, her demeanor betraying no hint of nervousness.

*"Lindvolus Block 1, Round 1, Match 3—begin!"*

As with so many things, victory would go to the one who made the first move.

Feardorcha swung his arm downward—and the Ororomunt, following his will, writhed like its namesake, its body of brilliant shards of light bending back and forth as it swooped toward Hilda. Its speed was such that an average fighter probably wouldn't have even been able to catch sight of the oncoming strike.

However—

"Hmm…?"

The tip of the blade came to a sudden stop above her head, perched as if in wait.

Feardorcha, however, had given it no such order. Confusion emanated from the Serpent Blade gripped tightly in his hand. But no matter how many times he tried to call it back, it wouldn't move. Some kind of unseen power must have been holding it in place.

"Keh-heh-heh-heh! Yes, yes! Just as I thought, this level of Orga Lux is no bother at all!"

Hilda hadn't moved at all. She merely continued to stand there, her arms drooping in front of her, her pointed teeth peeking through that strangely unsettling grin of hers.

*"Wh-what's this?! Why would Contestant O'Neill halt his attack…?"*

*"How stupid are you?! Look closely! You're a Genestella, too—you should be able to see what just happened!"*

It only took a second more after Zaharoula's outburst for Feardorcha to realize it for himself.

"Wh-what…? That's…"

"Keh-heh-heh-heh!"

A huge amount of prana had begun to swell up from Hilda's body—so much so that it was hard to believe she was even human. Indeed, the only time Feardorcha had ever seen such power before was in the form of that monster Orphelia Landlufen…

*"Huh?! Whoa! Sh-she really is! Er, um, what's going on here…?"*

*"It's been converted into an almost impossible amount of mana. In other words—Hilda Jane Rowlands is a Strega. There's no mistaking that."*

*"B-but we don't have any data on that…"*

Feardorcha shared in Mico's confusion.

Hilda simply couldn't have been a Strega. While it was common knowledge that not all Strega and Dantes were recorded in the various national registries, it was another thing entirely for someone to successfully hide that fact all the way up to their participation in the Festa.

And yet, there was no mistaking that she was managing to hold the Ororomunt at bay using a Strega ability. Even so, as a general principle, the abilities of Stregas and Dantes were no match for the power of an Orga Lux. If, for example, someone with the ability to cast fire was to go head-to-head with an Orga Lux possessing the same powers, they would undoubtedly lose. That was an unwritten law of nature.

Of course, depending on the circumstances, it wouldn't be impossible for such an individual to repel or evade an attack—but even so, there should have been no way that Hilda could have managed to overpower the Serpent Blade's movements the way she was doing now.

*"What kind of ability is that? Wind? A magnetic field? No, hold on a second…"* Zaharoula's voice trembled in disbelief.

The audience must have caught on to the unusual situation also, as an uneasy murmur began to spread through the galleries.

"Well, then… Let's continue." Hilda, ignoring the stunned disbelief of everyone watching, began to raise her arms.

All of a sudden, Feardorcha was sent flying backward by some tremendous burst of strength.

"Guh?!"

As he tumbled along the ground, he caught sight of Hilda raising her arms once more.

*This is bad…!*

He leaped to his feet—and at that moment, a network of fissures tore through the ground almost exactly where he would have come to a stop, some unseen force apparently bearing down on it.

*I guess this means it* can *be dodged, so that ability probably doesn't directly affect its target…*

As he wiped away the cold sweat building at his brow, Feardorcha set to analyzing his opponent's ability.

"Impressive! I can see how you made it to third place! Yes, a very fine reaction… Or perhaps my follow-through was a little late? Yes, that's probably it. Keh-heh-heh-heh! I suppose I'm still not quite used to it!"

With Hilda seemingly talking to herself once more, Feardorcha took advantage of that momentary opening to run back to retrieve the Ororomunt.

"Oops!"

Hilda swung her arm downward once more, but a top-ranked fighter like Feardorcha wasn't about to let himself fall victim to the same trick yet again. He deftly stepped aside, dodging that unseen *something*, before twisting his lips in a grin. "Don't underestimate the Ororomunt and me…"

"Oh?"

"Burst!" Feardorcha ordered his weapon, still frozen midair, as

he reached out to grasp it.

At that instant, the countless shards of light that comprised its blade suddenly exploded, scattering toward Hilda with great speed.

"Huh?"

It was like a land mine exploding in the air, sending an expanding wave of light flying in Hilda's direction. There should have been no avoiding it.

At first, she seemed to have used the ability of hers to defend herself, but on closer inspection, her body was covered with small lacerations.

For the Ororomunt, that was enough.

"Oh…? Oh dear…! This won't do at all. I see, I see. So this is the Ororomunt's poison…" She fell to her feet with a groan, raising a hand to her forehead.

The Ororomunt's poison took immediate effect. It brought on dizziness and fatigue without delay, making it all but impossible for one to focus their prana in an attempt to fight it off. For Stregas and Dantes in particular, it meant certain defeat.

Until now still frozen in the air, the Ororomunt fell to the ground with a thud, freed from Hilda's ability. New scales had already begun to form on its blade.

"Oh my, how splendid! You can even control that Orga Lux of yours remotely! Your compatibility rating—no, your bond with it—is beyond impressive! Oh, oh, everything's spinning around in circles! What an experience! Keh-heh-heh-heh!" Sweat building on her brow, Hilda broke out into a pained laugh.

Judging by her reaction, she clearly had more than just a few screws loose.

"Whatever. Once I break that school crest of yours, it'll be over," Feardorcha replied with a lack of concern as he went to retrieve his weapon, when—

"Ah, that won't do. No, not at all. We still have to run another experiment."

"—!"

At that moment, he stopped dead in his tracks, bumping up against what felt like an invisible wall.

"What the…?"

To Feardorcha's astonishment, Hilda, sitting cross-legged on the ground, flashed him her sharp, pointed teeth.

"Neh-heh-heh-heh! You'll have to forgive me—it's difficult to

stand up right now. I can't seem to focus my prana, either… So this is just a rough estimation of it."

The young man felt along the edge of the invisible wall, hoping to find an opening—but as hard to believe as it was, it seemed to cut across the entire stage.

"Now then, be good and watch. Yes, this should keep you entertained. You are about to witness a historic moment. Keh-heh-heh-heh!"

"…What are you playing at?"

As Feardorcha glared across the stage at her, Hilda, still grinning at him like a demon, raised her right hand into the air, then let it fall.

At that moment, the Ororomunt let out a violent shriek, before sinking to the ground before his eyes, its urm-manadite core letting out a piercing wail of anguish that cut across the stage.

"Wha—?! S-stop!" Feardorcha cried out in alarm.

Hilda, however, paid him no heed. "Now, then. Time for the main event."

Next, she made her right hand into a fist as if to channel her power—and with a horrendous snapping sound, row upon row of fissures began to run down the glowing length of the Ororomunt.

"No!"

The cracks continued to run farther down the blade of the weapon, engulfing one glowing scale after the next, speeding up as they approached its base.

"S-stop it! Stop!"

Feardorcha beat repeatedly against the invisible wall blocking him with his fists, but it wouldn't give an inch.

"Staaaaaaahp!"

A joyous glint shone in Hilda's eyes. "Keh-heh-heh-heh! Now, to wrap things up!"

No sooner did she finish speaking than the wave of destruction reached the Ororomunt's hilt—*shattering even its urm-manadite core*.

"…!"

Feardorcha, his eyes frozen wide in shock, fell silently to his knees.

"This can't be happening… Ororomunt…"

*"Sh-she's destroyed the urm-manadite core?! How is that even possible?!"*

*"It* has *been known to happen when two Orga Luxes clash with each*

*other, but even so…it's exceedingly rare. Even when the Ser Veresta directly attacked the Gravisheath at the last Phoenix, the exterior may have been destroyed, but the urm-manadite core was left intact. But then again, urm-manadite is incredibly durable. For a Strega to be able to destroy it using nothing but her personal abilities is unheard of."*

The two continued chattering, but neither analysis nor commentary could reach Feardorcha.

*"Ahhh… Arrgh… Ahhg…!"*

Tears ran down his face, his wailing growing louder with each sob.

"Yes, yes, as I expected. Thank you for your assistance…er, what did you say your name was again? Ah well. Farewell!"

Hilda's voice seemed to reach Feardorcha from behind a thick curtain—and with that, he lost consciousness.

"I suppose congratulations are due, no?"

Hilda, making her way down the dark corridor to her prep room following her winner's interview, came to a stop at the sight of the two figures waiting for her. One she knew well, the other she had never seen before.

"Neh-heh-heh-heh! No, not at all, you should save that sentiment for later—for after I've taken the championship!"

The first of the women, the one she knew—Ernesta Kühne—flashed her a wide smile. "You're as brimming with confidence as ever." She laughed. "You look a bit shaky right now, though… But I suppose that isn't new for you?"

"I analyzed the data on that Orga Lux prior to the match, of course, and prepared an antidote accordingly. Although, I must say, it was stronger than I expected."

She realized now that it had been a mistake to attempt to absorb that attack. If the device she had prepared to wear over her head had been working as designed, she would have been able to withstand it without any negative consequences—but as she was now, she was in bad shape. She had made a few minor adjustments a short time ago to stabilize its output, but she would have to perfect it before the next bout.

"Did you come here to observe my debut in the arena? You'll have to share your impressions with me."

At this, Ernesta's smile vanished completely. "That ability of yours…is strength itself, no?"

“Indeed! Yes, your discernment is as clear as usual! I’ve always thought the abilities of Stregas and Dantes to be more than a little unfair, what with their using powers like fire and lightning and the like. So this is probably a manifestation of my sensibilities in that regard.”

Hilda’s newfound Strega ability was simply that—being able to manipulate power itself. It resembled telekinesis at a broad level, but that similarity was only skin-deep.

“…So that makes you the second artificial Strega, after Orphelia Landlufen. If congratulations are in order, I suppose that’s what we should be praising.”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh! In that case, there’s no need to hold back!”

She had been able to successfully restart her Hercules Project, with its goal of creating artificial Genestella, and it had already gone off without a hitch to produce the strongest Strega in history. On top of that, her second experiment, using herself as the test subject, had been a complete success—although, strictly speaking, she had always been a Genestella, and so she had merely transformed herself into a Strega. As such, the next stage would require using an average person as the test subject.

That was why she had entered the Lindvolus—so she could use her wish to remove the fetters that Ayato Amagiri had placed upon her and regain her freedom.

“In that case, why didn’t you mention any of that during your interview?” Ernesta asked.

Indeed, Hilda hadn’t even touched upon the Hercules Project in her winner’s interview and had deflected even those questions that related to her own powers.

“It’s still too early, of course. I’ll reveal everything in due time, once I have proof that the new phase of the project surpasses the last one.”

“…You mean once you’ve defeated Orphelia Landlufen?”

“Indeed. If I’m to win this tournament, that’s one obstacle that will have to be removed!”

“You really are brimming with confidence!” Ernesta laughed.

“Keh-heh-heh-heh! Perhaps a little.”

Before restarting the Hercules Project, Orphelia Landlufen had been her only success—but at the same time, that success had been an irregularity she’d been unable to reproduce.

Now, however, the situation had changed.

Now she herself was the ultimate success, proving once and for all that the process was indeed reproducible.

“Hmph! Lena’s the one who’s going to win!” exclaimed the young girl hiding in Ernesta’s shadow, puffing out her cheeks.

“Dear me… And who might this be?”

“Autonomous Puppet Prototype LN-T, Lenaty. She’s going to win the Lindvolus as my substitute.”

“Oh? Indeed!”

Ernesta and Hilda stood facing each other for a short moment, each staring at the other with an unyielding smile.

Ernesta was the only person whose talent Hilda was willing to acknowledge as equal to her own. Allekant’s research classes may have served as breeding grounds for the incompetent, but Ernesta was different—Ernesta, she was willing to admit, was a genius. Indeed, while her autonomous puppets Ardy and Rimcy that she had used in the Phoenix were still rough around the edges, they were undeniably filled with promise. The technology required to control urm-manadite using artificial intelligence seemed to be taking a different approach to enter the same domain that she herself was beginning to wade into.

“She must be quite the performer, if you’re willing to talk like that. Do let me take a look.”

Hilda couldn’t help but be intrigued by Ernesta’s most recent creation. However, when she tried to cup her hand below Lenaty’s cheek to lift her face, the small figure slapped her away.

“Gross! Don’t touch Lena!” Lenaty growled, almost like a threatened animal.

“Oh my, it appears that she doesn’t quite like me. Well, I can’t say that children or animals have ever really liked me… But to think that even the likes of a mere doll would feel that way…”

“Lena isn’t a doll!”

With that, Lenaty’s eyes seemed to change color, and a huge sword-shaped Lux manifested in her right hand. It was remarkably ill-proportioned compared to her small body—the hilt alone seemed to be almost half as long as she was tall.

“Mom, can I break her?”

The glowing blade, easily exceeding two meters in length, was too large even to fit inside the narrow corridor, its tip jutting into the far wall.

“Oh? Judging by the structure surrounding the core, that does

appear to be Camilla Pareto's work. Although, that's a very daring design for *her*…"

*"Yargh!"*

Before Hilda could finish speaking, Lenaty brought her oversized blade crashing through the wall. Unworried, Hilda used her power to hold it back—or so she thought.

"Oh?"

The wide slash did, in fact, come to a stop, but then—

"*Yarrrrrrrgh*!" Lenaty cried, shaking her off.

Hilda quickly leaped backward but only barely prevented the tip of that long blade from slicing clean though her. As it was, the hem of her lab coat fell softly to the ground.

"This *is* a surprise! What power! Or rather, what urm-manadite! I take it there are multiple cores installed in her?"

"I wonder?" Ernesta replied with an overly broad smile.

"But she isn't very disciplined, now, is she?"

"That hurts, hearing you say that… But I guess it can't be helped. I have to agree with her. You are a bit gross."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh! What a nasty thing to say. I am used to it, though," Hilda answered, still staring down at Lenaty.

It had been bothering her for a while now—there was something incongruous about the puppet's behavior.

Ernesta wrapped her arms around her puppet from behind.

"Mommm! Let me gooo!"

"Now, now, be patient, Lenaty. You have a match soon. You don't want to waste your energy here, do you?" Ernesta remonstrated.

"No! I wanna break herrr!" Lenaty whined, tantrum-esque.

As she stared down at her, Hilda found herself struck by an idea.

"Ha-ha…! Don't tell me, Ernesta…"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

“This child isn’t under your control, is she?” Hilda asked.

At this, Ernesta broke out into a genuine smile, completely different from the expression she had been showing up till now. “Heh… You’ve got a good eye. I guess that’s why they call you Magnum Opus.”

“Oh? It’s just instinct. It merely occurred to me that it’s the kind of thing you would do.”

“Indeed. I didn’t create Lenaty to follow my orders. No, she’s not designed to follow anyone’s orders. I made her to think for herself, to decide for herself, and to grow by herself. And of course, I haven’t built in any restraining functions, either.” Ernesta paused there, patting Lenaty lovingly on the head, before continuing softly: “I mean, what would be the point? Even if she had the ability to act freely, if she had to abide by some kind of restraining system, she would still be a machine. But my puppets are more than that.”

“Keh-heh-heh-heh! This might sound strange coming from me… but you really are mad, Ernesta. That doll of yours could kill you at any moment. It could make its way into the galleries and massacre everyone. And you’re not going to take any responsibility for that?”

“Lena would never do that!” the puppet responded, clearly offended.

Hilda, however, paid her no heed. “Ah, but how…how splendidly wonderful! Yes, very impressive, very impressive! You really are just like me!”

That was Ernesta Kühne’s true nature.

That was Ernesta Kühne’s madness.

There was a world beyond the current era waiting for them to reach out and touch—and it seemed that Hilda wasn’t alone in peering into it.

“Heh-heh! I don’t want to be lumped in with you… But well, I can’t deny it. Anyway…” Ernesta paused there, narrowing her eyes. “How exactly did you avoid Lenaty’s attack just now?”

“Ah…?”

“You may be a Genestella, but you’ve never even tried to train your body before, am I right? No one who enters the Lindvolus without any training should be able to avoid Lenaty’s attacks.”

Yes, Ernesta truly was insightful.

She tapped her fingers against her head before continuing, her

tone of voice deathly cold: “Those giant headphones of yours—they’re from the Skill Installation Project, aren’t they?”

“How discerning of you! Yes, indeed they are. I was, after all, assisting in that project during my time away from my real work. So I had one of my juniors working there put some of the technology born from it to use.”

“In other words, you stole it.”

“What a shameful thing to say. I’m the one who made that project bear anything of practical use. This is just compensation for my efforts.”

The Skill Installation Project was originally designed to copy fighting data and techniques from the second-generation Master Swordsman Gilbert Premelin, formerly of Allekant Académie’s practical class, to other fighters. In theory, it should have been possible to mass-produce fighters with Premelin’s repertoire of techniques, but the subjects were unable to properly process everything and ended up becoming highly psychologically volatile. Eventually, it reached a state where one such subject murdered an innocent bystander.

“Although, I have to say, I doubt that frail body of yours is up to employing our master swordsman’s skills.”

“We’re quite alike in that regard, aren’t we? Something tells me that you’ve never wasted your time working on your body, either. No?”

“Hmm, unlike you, I’ve got a bit of flesh on my bones.”

“…And precisely what is that supposed to mean?”

But even Hilda could see that they were losing sight of their main topic.

“Well anyway, physical restructuring is our specialty at Tenorio. It just so happens that I have undergone some amount of tempering, and as unpleasant and as hastily done as it was, this body of mine can replicate Premelin’s movements without causing any undue damage.”

“Oh? A remodeled body based on Tenorio’s processes? That must be something.”

“Indeed. I’m a veritable *Übermensch*. Keh-heh-heh-heh!”

With the overwhelming Strega abilities she had received from the Hercules Project, and with Premelin’s fighting prowess from the Skill Installation Project, she really was insurmountable.

“…A posteriori talent surpasses a priori gifts. That’s your motto

over at Tenorio, isn't it?"

"Oh, you have a good memory. Precisely."

The world was unbalanced and unfair.

Whether a Genestella, whether a Strega or Dante, whether one was endowed with physical strength, agility, or beauty, from the very moment they were born, people were always being measured against others—and out of that measuring process, a select few truly outstanding individuals would rise to the top, and the vast majority would be left without. And yet, it was the latter group, the majority, on whom the wheels of society turned. It was a truly deplorable state of affairs.

If that powerless, unenlightened majority could be pulled up, then there was hope that this vulgar world of theirs could be brightened somewhat.

That was Tenorio's guiding principle.

"Well, I have no desire to discuss your dogma," Ernesta said. "However…it will be *me*—and Lenaty—who will win this tournament. I promise you that."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh! In that case, let's settle this on the stage…! Ah, if only."

"…If only?"

"No, I just don't feel like striking down that child of yours right now."

Both she and Lenaty would no doubt make it through the preliminaries—Hilda had no doubt about that.

However—

"Ha-ha, is that your fabled intuition speaking?"

"Indeed, something like that," Hilda answered plainly.

Ernesta's shoulders trembled with amusement. "You really are a pain to deal with. I suppose I've always known that."

"Keh-heh-heh-heh! I'm sure our good friend Shuuma would prefer it if we didn't end up fighting each other… But I suppose we'll just have to wait and see, no? Let's do our best, the both of us."

"Yes. For the Académie."

"Indeed. For Allekant."

And with those feigned words of encouragement, the two parted ways.

Neither was yet to know that it would be the last time they would meet face-to-face at the Sirius Dome.

*

Meanwhile, the first match of Block N's third round was underway.

*"Haah… Haah…"*

"Impressive, Priscilla. I saw how you fought in the Phoenix… and to be honest, I never thought you'd be able to become quite this strong," Sylvia said as she reconfigured her favorite Lux, the bayonet-shaped Fólkvangr, into firing mode.

"Th-thank you…! You're incredible, too, Sylvia…! You haven't even played one of your songs yet…!"

Standing in the center of the stage, Priscilla was supporting herself with her club, her breath faint and ragged. Even so, her fighting spirit lived on in her eyes.

And that was in spite of being continuously under fire right from the beginning of the match.

"Sorry. I'm not trying to make light of you or anything, and I'm definitely not trying to go easy on you… But I'd rather not show my hand yet."

In tag team battles, it wasn't necessarily disastrous to reveal one's trump card early, as most battles hinged on a player's ability to coordinate with their partner or team. In the Lindvolus, however, that logic didn't apply. If you ended up getting stuck with a bad opponent, there was no taking back what you had already revealed. Not even Sylvia, with her unusually powerful all-around abilities, was an exception to that rule.

"There's no need to apologize! I'm just sorry about my own lack of skill…!"

Priscilla paused there, catching her breath and readying her club.

Priscilla Urzaiz was the former tag partner and younger sister of Irene Urzaiz, Le Wolfe's famed Lamilexia—and on top of that, an extremely rare class of regenerative.

That said, at the Phoenix, she had merely been there to support Irene, giving her blood to the point of exhaustion to feed Irene's Orga Lux, the Gravisheath.

Two and a half years had passed since then. It was certainly enough time for someone to change, but too short for them to become as strong as she had.

Or at least, it should have been.

"I'm coming, Priscilla!"

"Yes!"

Sylvia drew closer to her opponent, firing off a continuous bombardment as cover. Her shots were aimed directly at her foe's vital points and school crest, but Priscilla deflected each and every one with the help of her club. In the meantime, Sylvia, having circled around her right-hand side, let loose a further barrage at point-blank range, but Priscilla used her club as a brace to leap over her head, landing safely on the ground behind her and delivering a pointed strike of her own. Sylvia wasted no time before shifting the Fólkvangr into slashing mode and moving to counter.

*She's… She's already got a first-class defense…*

Even though Priscilla's attacks hadn't managed to deal a significant blow, it was hard to believe that she could have developed such skilled defensive techniques without already having put in considerable effort—and even then, it was still unbelievable given the amount of time she'd had to develop herself. On top of that, without a masterful teacher…

"I see. So did you study at the Liangshan?" Sylvia whispered as she brought the Fólkvangr down upon her.

*"Ngh!"* Priscilla caught the blow with her own weapon, but her expression appeared startled.

By the looks of it, Sylvia had guessed right.

"…You know about it?"

"Well, I am a student council president." Sylvia smiled, her face drawing close to Priscilla's as they locked weapons.

*"Erg!"* Priscilla pulled away, leaping backward to put some distance between them both. "I… I was only allowed to go there because of my sister. I don't have much in the way of results to show for it."

"Results?"

"Miss Xinglou ranks all the students at the Liangshan according to her own system. But given that I'm only ranked as *teibu*, I must have fallen short. Strictly speaking, we only know our own positions in the ranking. I haven't met any of the others, and I don't even know how they are. Except for my sister, of course."

"Oh…? How interesting. But are you sure it's okay to tell me all this? Isn't it supposed to be a secret?"

"According to Xinglou, we're free to reveal whatever we want now that the tournament is underway. Not that I really know any more than that, though," Priscilla said, readying her club once

more.

It looked like she wanted to keep going.

Sylvia should have expected as much. If Priscilla had been trained by Xinglou, she wouldn't allow herself to give up just because her opponent was stronger.

*In that case… I guess I don't have much choice but to overpower her.*

She let out a deep sigh, opening her eyes wide.

*"Run, run! Let's tear down our walls; let's surpass ourselves! Run, run!"*

As her powerful voice echoed across the stage, the massive crowds' level of enthusiasm suddenly skyrocketed. It didn't matter whether it was a match or a live concert, Sylvia never tired of this moment.

"Your song…!" Priscilla's expression became suddenly more severe.

Sylvia's songs were capable of producing close to any effect—the one notable exception being that they couldn't heal injuries.

However, they weren't all-powerful, and there were, of course, limitations. To begin with, each song had only one fixed effect. Second, she had to compose all those songs designed to manifest specific abilities by herself, and that included writing the lyrics.

On top of that, her abilities were extremely sensitive—even one wrong word or one off note could be enough to change the produced effects completely.

Moreover, the stronger the effect produced, the more prana it consumed. For example, if she was to try to replicate the strength of the Stjarnagarm's commander, Helga Lindwall, she would undoubtedly burn through her reserves in no time at all.

And finally, the effects of her songs corresponded to their overall length. Those effects wouldn't dissipate if she was to stop singing partway through, but their efficacy would be greatly diminished.

*"If thoughts alone can't reach you, if wishes alone aren't enough, then I'll go beyond my limits, I'll keep pushing on!"*

She could feel the power gushing up from within her.

Still singing, Sylvia leaped forward, slashing upward at her opponent from directly in front.

"Guh…!"

Priscilla managed to dodge it by a hair's breadth, but Sylvia

didn't waste a second before following through with a ferocious sequence of additional strikes.

This was the latest version of one of her standard musical numbers, updated and improved to further increase her strength. As she was now, she suspected that she would be able to stand toe to toe even against Ayato fighting unencumbered by those seals that had been placed upon him.

She spun the Fólkvangr through the air, weaving together a complex chain of upper, mid, and lower strikes.

However—

"I—I won't give up…!"

Somehow, Priscilla was managing to withstand the full intensity of her onslaught.

She swung her club desperately, at times dodging, at times meeting the oncoming blows, at times pushing them away, frantically adapting to Sylvia's rapid assault.

No—strictly speaking, she wasn't managing to deflect every single blow. Those that did reach their target left deep, glaring wounds.

Those wounds, however, disappeared almost instantaneously.

*I see… Her defense is already impressive, but combined with her regenerative ability, it really is exceptional.*

Without relaxing her assault, Sylvia took in the situation. From what she could see, Priscilla wasn't simply failing to deflect certain attacks—rather, she was selectively focusing on protecting her vitals and her school crest. In that case, it was probably fair to say that she was managing to see through her moves. But even so, even regenerating her wounds, she would have to have been in pain.

Sylvia pulled back for a split second, before putting all her strength into yet another set of strikes—but this time, Priscilla managed to ward off each and every one, preventing her from making a direct hit.

*"Haah…! Haah…!"*

"…I'm impressed, Priscilla," Sylvia stated as she caught her breath, her song finished. "Do you have a wish you're fighting for?"

Her opponent, however, shook her head, flashing a brave smile. "No, I just want to show my sister how strong I've become… I knew from the very beginning that I was no match for you, Sylvia. But if I were to give up, that would mean I haven't grown at all!"

"I see… That reminds me, you did say you can't rely on her to

protect you forever. And it looks like you're as good as your word… I think you're incredible."

Priscilla stared back at her blankly. "Huh…? H-how do you…? Have we met somewhere before…?"

"Ah, so you didn't recognize me, after all. It was at the school fair last year, with Ayato."

"A… *Ah!*" Priscilla exclaimed in shock, her mouth opening and closing wordlessly.

Yes, this wasn't the first time the two had come face-to-face. At last year's school fair, Sylvia had gone with Ayato to visit Asterisk's other schools and had stopped for lunch at a small stall that Priscilla had been operating at Le Wolfe.

Of course, she had been disguised at the time, and judging by her reaction, Priscilla hadn't seen through that.

"S-so that was you…? What a surprise!"

"Hee-hee, thanks again. Your paella was delicious."

"Thank you… Now you've given me another reason not to give up!" Priscilla declared with a bold smile as she brought her club down once more.

"Oh? Is that a declaration of war, then?"

Even back then, Priscilla had seemed to be harboring more than just gratitude toward Ayato. The last thing Sylvia wanted was to make yet another rival, but she also knew that she had no right to attempt to dissuade her.

Priscilla, however, still grasping her weapon, fidgeted nervously. "Th-that's not it!" she sputtered in denial. "I'm just… I'm grateful to him. Because he saved my sister—and me, too."

"…I see," Sylvia replied.

"Let's leave it at that," she added under her breath.

"In that case, you'd better be ready! I'm going to go all out!"

Given how determined her opponent was, it wouldn't be fair if she didn't respond in kind.

"Please!" Priscilla responded, lifting her club over her head and bending her knees.

Sylvia recognized it immediately for what it was—one of Jie Long's defensive postures. Her defensive skills truly were impressive.

In that case, she would simply have to smash her way through.

"*Rarghhhhhhhhh*!" Sylvia cried out, lunging forward and striking at her opponent's school crest.

“Here!” Priscilla, as if expecting this move, parried with her club.

Then, after raising her weapon to push the Fólkvangr out of her way, she tightened her grip and thrust toward Sylvia’s own school crest.

It was an all-or-nothing counter, in which she had put all her energy.

“No way!”

Sylvia, having anticipated this possibility, had already switched the Fólkvangr over into its firing mode. She leaped backward in order to avoid Priscilla’s counter, pivoted her Lux around in a full revolution, and pulled the trigger.

*“Arghhhhh!”*

The bullet of light that shot out from its muzzle made direct contact with her twin-bladed school crest, the impact powerful enough to send Priscilla falling backward.

*“End of battle! Winner: Sylvia Lyyneheym!”*

“Phew…”

If there was ever going to be a chance to break through Priscilla’s complete and utter devotion to her defense, it would be in the midst of one of her counters. It had all depended on the right timing, but fortunately for Sylvia, she had managed to deliver the perfect blow.

“Ow…” Priscilla rose to her feet with a grimace, before fixing her with a tender smile. “You win… Please, do your best in the main tournament.”

“Thank you, Priscilla. Actually…there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you for a while now.”

“Huh? Wh-what do you mean?”

“…Do you think you could teach me how to make your paella? The one from the school fair?”

Priscilla seemed taken aback for a second at this request, but it wasn’t long until her expression became one of delight. “Yes, of course!”

*

*“End of battle! Winner: Noelle Messmer!”*

In the student council room at Saint Gallardworth Academy, the

student council president, Elliot Forster, let out a sigh of relief. On the other side of the air-window, the young woman with bangs so long that they almost completely covered her eyes clenched her fist in delight.

"Good grief. She's made it all the way into the main tournament…"

Elliot had, of course, wanted to go to the venue to support Noelle in person, but there was so much work that needed to be done. He was ashamed of himself for having failed to attend her match for such a pathetic reason, but he could see no way out of his current situation.

In any event, Noelle's victory had been all but assured even without his attending. While her position in the academy's rankings remained unchanged, she was now so strong that she would probably be able to hold her own against even the school's first- and second-ranked fighters. As ashamed as it made him feel, he knew also that without the Lei-Glems, she would undoubtedly be beyond his level of ability also.

It pained him just to think that this was all the result of the Ban'yuu Tenra's guidance.

"Geez… That's the real problem here."

He let out a deep sigh before shrinking the air-window displaying the live feed from Noelle's match and then turning to the one beside it.

Projected there, the next match featuring another of Gallardworth's fighters was already underway at the Procyon Dome.

"And now we have…Floberge, by the looks of it. I suppose that's one of the better alternatives—although, the sooner someone beats him, the better it will be for all of us…"

That kind of statement wasn't particularly becoming of the academy's student council president, but Elliot had his reasons.

*They* were a taboo subject at Gallardworth. From what he could tell, the academy's upper management had forced them to enter the tournament against their will.

Perhaps he was merely anxious about Noelle. He had tried to dissuade her from entering as much as he could, but he was unable to overturn her decision.

As much as it vexed him to admit it, if Ernest were still student council president, the upper management wouldn't have had the audacity to attempt something so dangerous. It was painful, being

continuously reminded of just how little they thought of him.

"It's one headache after another…"

He leaned forward over his desk, resting his chin in his hands as he scowled at the young man presented in the air-window.

At the very least, he prayed that the match would end without incident.

"…What the hell's that? Do you even want to be here?"

The petite black-haired young woman—Le Wolfe Black Institute's ninth-ranked fighter, the Sand Dragon, Roswitha Dietze, alias Amphisbaena—snorted in derision. In her hands she gripped a small hammer-shaped Orga Lux—the Typhon Ankh—capable of manipulating sand.

There was something unbelievably strange about the man standing across from her.

He had a tall, slender figure, with well-proportioned facial features, but his mouth was hidden behind a black leather mask, and the hair stretching all the way down his back was a mix of the colors of the rainbow—or rather, a complex mix of every color imaginable.

There was no doubting that Le Wolfe had a considerable number of oddities within its ranks, but Roswitha found it hard to believe that Gallardworth, normally so fastidious about order and regularity, could be home to such an idiosyncratic individual.

*And they call him the Black Knight… Who are they trying to kid?*

Since students participating in the Festa were listed according to the name recorded in their respective school's records, there were those, especially from Queenvale, who in effect entered under an alias. But that meant that the guy in front of her normally went by the name of the Black Knight. And to top it off, he was from Gallardworth. It all felt like some kind of bad joke.

This Black Knight was wielding a typical broadsword-shaped Lux, but even though the match had already gotten underway, he showed no indication of using it to launch an attack. All he did was casually dodge every strike that she attempted to throw at him. It didn't even look like he was interested in fighting at all.

"Do I want to be here…? Hmm, I wonder. If I had to say one way or the other, then probably not," came the knight's muffled voice as he shrugged.

"The hell? Are you screwing with me? Go and withdraw, then!"

Brandishing the Ankh, she glanced upward—and all of a sudden, the ground at their feet burst into an explosion of sand, out of which three gigantic wolflike figures descended upon her opponent.

"I would very much like to, but unfortunately, this was the majority decision," he continued as he dodged each lunge of their fangs and claws. "Having said that, I don't take pleasure in this kind of savagery. Some of the others are more suitable to this than I am… But we don't always get what we want in life."

He was clearly joking around, but she couldn't deny that he had skill.

In fact, he had dealt the finishing blow to his opponents in the first and second rounds practically at the very beginning of each match. The only thing that bothered Roswitha was that he had used different weapons and battle styles in all his matches up till now.

In the first round, he had wielded several gun-type Luxes in a flashy, overly dramatic manner, while in the second round, he had used a conventional sword-type Lux and cut his opponent down from below. This was his first time ever entering in the Festa, and there were no records of him participating in any official ranking matches, so there was no other data that Roswitha could use to go on and, of course, no video recordings. But if he was as strong as he seemed to be, there should have at least been rumors going around, no matter how weird he was. And yet—nothing.

*"Um… Hey, Chitose. Just what do you think the Black Knight's trying to accomplish right now?"*

*"I wonder… His battle style is completely different compared to his last two matches… I give up. It makes no sense to me."*

By the sound of it, not even the announcer or commentator knew what to make of him.

"Ah, indeed. Why don't you withdraw, Miss? That would save both of us from having to see this pointless contest through," the knight suggested.

Judging by the sincerity in his voice, he was being serious.

"!"

That was when Roswitha snapped.

She had always been short-tempered, always faster to jump to action than to words. Nor was she the kind of person to feel any sense of obligation toward exercising self-restraint.

So she poured her prana into her weapon, and a giant arm of

sand easily more than fifteen feet in height rose up from the earth.

"Die!"

"Oh dear. And I thought it was a good idea…"

The huge arm of sand dived down toward the Black Knight's head in an attempt to crush him as he fought to evade the attacks of her sand wolves.

Even so, his speed was such that he managed to dodge every one of those oncoming strikes.

"Oh…?"

The great fist, having slammed into the ground, was beginning to collapse back into a mountain of sand—but from that huge mound emerged innumerable snakelike creatures that snared themselves around his legs.

The Black Knight was unable to escape those serpents emerging at his feet.

"Heh!" Roswitha flashed her opponent, bound now hand and foot, a triumphant grin. "Now that's more like it!"

"That was careless of me… Well then, I suppose that I *am* in a bind."

Her opponent's unflagging sense of enigma was still grating on her, but she wouldn't have to suffer it much longer.

"Time to finish this. Be ready!"

"I should urge you not to do that… Although, it may already be too late. Very well. Be aware, however, that I won't be *me* anymore, and there's no telling just how savage I'll become."

Roswitha had no idea what her opponent was trying to say by the end of that, nor did she particularly care to. She lifted the Ankh into position, ready to deal the finishing blow, when—

"Eh…?"

A black, mud-like liquid suddenly erupted out of nowhere, enveloping the Black Knight and consuming in a heartbeat the sand serpents that bound him.

"H-hey, what are you…?!"

She watched as her opponent raised his arms to shield his eyes from the raging sand, and then, still enveloped in that jet-black mud, he bowed his head. Before her eyes, that fluid hardened, covering his body like a suit of armor. From the section that covered his head, two twisted horns sprouted, making the whole combination look for all the world like some kind of ungodly blending of a Western suit of armor and a living, breathing demon.

Looking at him now, Roswitha finally understood why people called him the Black Knight.

"Eh, so you're a Dante! That just proves you're no match for me, then!"

Given that she had felt a sudden surge of mana emanating out from him, there could be no mistaking that he was indeed a Dante. The only unusual thing about it was that she had sensed several sources of prana, all overlapping at the exact same moment. She had never sensed such a thing before, but she didn't have time to stop and wonder about it.

At that moment, the Black Knight let out a deep, terrible war cry:

"Hraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

She froze in place at the sound of that bestial howl, itself completely devoid of reason or sensibility.

"Wh-what the hell?! Don't startle me like that!"

The Black Knight, however, merely turned his face toward her without responding.

"Eep…!"

The two eyes staring back at her through that jet-black helmet were filled with madness. Roswitha knew it immediately—almost painfully so.

What she was facing now was completely different from her opponent of a moment ago. Standing in front of her was something unknown, something nauseatingly dangerous.

"*Ugh…!* Now I've done it…!"

But even so, Roswitha's innate sense of determination took control.

With a wave of the Ankh, the three sand wolves still surrounding the Black Knight lunged toward him all at once. They may have been composed of sand, but their fangs were powerful enough to rend through tempered steel. Even if her opponent was fully armored, she could still be confident of victory.

However—

The Black Knight seemed to pay little heed to her minions as they tore into his neck, his left arm, and his right leg all at the same time. He merely brandished his huge sword and casually brushed them off one by one. The sword, similarly coated in a glistening layer of that black mud-like substance, effortlessly cut through the sand summons, reducing them all to piles of dirt.

And then, slowly, he began to approach her.

"Th-that's…!"

Panicked, Roswitha hurried to manipulate the sand at her feet to produce hundreds of pointed spears.

"Go!"

With that, those spears all flew toward the Black Knight, poised to skewer him through—when they all rebounded feebly off his armor, collapsing back into loose particles.

"Wh-what the…? That's… What the hell is that?!"

Stregas and Dantes capable of producing means of shielding themselves weren't uncommon—perhaps most famous among them was Gallardworth's Brightwen, who had competed in the Phoenix, while the Strega who had defeated him, Seidoukan's Glühen Rose, had also been able to create a shield of raw flames.

However, shields and armor produced by one's abilities didn't tend to be particularly durable, and they should have been absolutely incapable of deflecting the attacks of an Orga Lux.

It should have been impossible.

But that was what he was doing.

"What the hell is that?! Tell me!"

Roswitha poured every last ounce of her prana into the Typhon Ankh, summoning up blades, axes, and even a towering dragon figure all composed of sand, but nothing she did was enough to stop the Black Knight's indomitable approach. All it took was one swing of his sword to dispel whatever she threw at him.

He continued to draw nearer, slowly and steadily.

*"Ngh…!"*

When at last she realized that she had no choice but to retreat and turned her back to her opponent—

*"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!"*

—with a terrible roar, the Black Knight's blade flickered through the air.

"Aaagh!" She cried out in agony as blood splattered from both her legs. She collapsed onto the ground, her face contorted in pain. All she could do was turn her head around to her attacker, only to see him towering over her.

With the light hidden behind him, that towering figure with his great sword raised over his head looked like none other than the devil himself.

"Yeek…!"

More than the pain, it was her sense of terror that won over.

Her thoughts were all over the place, but she knew that she had to get away, somehow, somewhere… Unable to stand, she pulled herself across the ground with her hands, possessed by only a single thought—that she had to escape, even if only a little, from this demonic creature.

"Raaaa

been given the appellation of Black Knight for convenience's sake. Elliot had no idea who had first thought of the title, but he couldn't help but wonder what exactly they had been thinking. Although, from what he knew, those personalities themselves seemed to be rather taken by it.

The Black Knight was normally kept in isolation and never came into contact with the general student population—the student council included. The general student body probably hadn't even known about the knight's very existence until "they" had been entered into the tournament. "They" were under the direct supervision of Sinodomius and the academy's upper management.

As for why the upper management tolerated such a burdensome student, no doubt management was interested only in his extraordinary abilities.

All of those twenty personalities were Dantes in their own right, and in critical situations, their thoughts would become entangled, as would their respective abilities. At such moments, when that combined ability was brought to the fore, they would become utterly ferocious, and if they were in the heat of battle, they wouldn't give up on their attack until their foe was left completely incapacitated.

That ability was referred to only as *invincibility*.

The jet-black armor produced by the blending of those numerous abilities boasted incredible defensive properties and could deflect even the attacks of Orga Luxes—as indeed had happened just a short moment prior.

While Elliot couldn't say whether that armor would be effective against one of the Four Colored Runeswords, it was at the very least on par with that defensive barrier that had been employed by Allekant's autonomous puppet Ardy during the Phoenix.

"Argh… In any event, I had better see how the management wants to handle this."

But of course, it would be he himself who would bear the full brunt of criticism for this incident.

He would have to provide some sort of explanation in order to minimize the inevitable penalty, but it wasn't up to him to decide just how much to reveal.

"This year's Lindvolus really is out of control…"

Grasping his throbbing head in one hand, he opened a direct line to the upper management.

# CHAPTER 7
# QUICKENING

A short while earlier, during the course of the first round—

There were several cities situated on the shores of the North Kanto Mass-Impact Crater Lake in which Asterisk was located. Prior to the Invertia, there had been a number of suburban municipalities in the region, but since then, the majority of them had developed considerably as physical distribution bases to service Asterisk. Most of these were merely cities in name alone and were operated 24/7 almost exclusively by legions of autonomous puppets and unmanned vehicles.

Kirin was presently visiting one such city, generally referred to only as Seven; it was situated to the west of Asterisk.

"…It's a lot like Asterisk's harbor block," she murmured to herself as she hid in the shadow of a huge warehouse.

That was to be expected; the area in which she presently found herself was practically identical to the storage and distribution centers found at Asterisk's margins. A little farther inland was a huge operations center for storing goods brought overland, but what Kirin was interested in now wasn't that.

The night sky was overcast, completely shrouding the moon and stars, and while there were towering streetlamps installed along the roads at regular intervals, these were insufficient to fully illuminate the immediate vicinity. No doubt the area had been designed from the very beginning to be operated by machines. There was what looked like large emergency lighting equipment scattered here and there, but at the moment, they were mere ornamentation. Thanks to that, it was easy to move around

undetected. Just to be sure, however, she had memorized the blind spots in the security systems in advance.

"Now then, next we have…"

Dressed in her poor excuse for a disguise—a black outfit and corresponding cap—Kirin made her way from shadow to shadow, peering into the next huge warehouse. The dim light was enough for her to barely make out, with effort, the contents of the vast cavity. There was no sign of any people, nor, for that matter, any machines.

"Not this one, either…"

She opened a small window on her mobile device to check her map. Thus far, she had investigated three of the warehouses. According to Claudia's information, the Golden Bough Alliance was supposedly making use of them all…and yet, they had all been completely empty.

"*It will be dangerous to go alone, but the situation being what it is, you're the only person we can rely on right now, Kirin*," she remembered Claudia saying to her apologetically, her head bowed.

With the Lindvolus well and truly underway, Ayato, Saya, and Sylvia were naturally unable to leave the site of the tournament for too long without being noticed. On top of that, Hilda and Haruka presently had a mountain of issues to deal with, and in any event, the lakeside cities were outside Stjarnagarm's jurisdiction. They could hardly ask officers of the city guard to do something that was so obviously illegal.

Which meant that, in the end, Kirin was the one who had to do it.

She would have been lying if she had said that she wasn't anxious, but her long-held desire to help Ayato in whatever way she could had won over. She had accepted the assignment without the slightest hesitation.

*"According to my investigations, the Golden Bough Alliance—or rather, Madiath Mesa himself—is using a dummy company by the name of Nemorensis Holdings as a front. As we've come to expect, there's no concrete evidence, but there's definitely something fishy about it. We want you to investigate the warehouses in Seven owned by this Nemorensis."*

Claudia had said that Nemorensis had taken control of four warehouses last week—which meant that there was only one remaining.

Kirin made her way to the entrance of the last warehouse. Unlike the previous three, bright lights could be seen emanating from inside. She peered in, trying to fade into the background—but contrary to her expectations, this warehouse, too, was empty.

Except—it wasn't *completely* empty. In the center of that huge space was a figure, standing there with arms folded.

"You're too late. Everything has already been shipped out."

The disinterested voice belonged to a young woman, probably a member of the Alliance. More importantly, however—the figure was clearly speaking to Kirin.

She had been exposed. She could try to escape, but there was a high likelihood that this woman knew something that could prove useful.

In that case—

"…You've got sharp senses. I hid my presence as best I could," she answered, scanning her surroundings as she showed herself in the entranceway.

As she had expected, the two of them were alone.

"My eyes can see through all truths. You can't hide anything from me. Think of it as being similar to your clairvoyance, Kirin Toudou."

"—!" At this, Kirin's eyes opened wide in surprise. The woman had seen through her.

Just as she had seen through her in turn.

"Percival Gardner…from Gallardworth, no?"

She was Saint Gallardworth Academy's fifth-ranked fighter, wielder of the Holy Grail—an Orga Lux also known as the Amalthean Goat—and a member of Team Lancelot from the Gryps.

Kirin had never spoken to her directly, but she had seen her once in person at the opening ceremony of the Gryps.

Even now, she deeply regretted the fact that she had been unable to participate in the match herself due to the injuries she had sustained in her semifinals match, but she had watched the championship from her hospital bed. There could be no mistaking the person she was presently facing.

Unlike then, however, Percival was dressed now not in her white Gallardworth uniform but rather in what looked like black military attire. Her penchant for wearing men's clothing was well-known, but in her current outfit, she looked truly dashing.

"Wh-what are you doing here…?"

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m here to eliminate anyone who tries to interfere,” Percival replied, activating two handgun-type Luxes.

Kirin wasted no time before unsheathing the Hiinamaru and raising it in front of herself.

“That said, D really is impressive. If we had been even a little bit slower, you would have us by the tail right now. Flawless predictions and precise instructions. What more could you want in a master?” Percival murmured.

There was something strangely inorganic about her appearance. Indeed, her whole atmosphere was completely different than Kirin remembered. She was still as expressionless as she had always been, but now the impression that she left was completely different, dark and stagnant like a sludge-filled mire.

“Are you part of the Golden Bough Alliance…?” Kirin asked as she carefully inched forward.

Percival, however, shook her head. “Not exactly. I’m no more than their gun. My job is just to bury their enemies.”

“Do you know what they’re trying to accomplish?”

“I don’t care.”

Kirin had no idea whether she was merely trying to dodge her questions or if she honestly felt that way—but either way, she doubted she would answer her honestly.

“If you’re working for the Alliance…I won’t let you escape!”

“Fine with me.”

Kirin changed her fighting posture, raising her blade overhead.

Percival, on the other hand, closed her eyes, murmuring to herself as if in prayer: “*I am your gun, no more. I will take the sins of destroying your enemies unto myself.*”

No sooner did she open her eyes than she unleashed a barrage of bullets of light from both handguns.

It was an accurate, precise onslaught, with no obvious weaknesses—but Kirin knew that she would have no trouble dodging it. With her sense of clairvoyance, she could read Percival’s every move. She pushed forward, closing the distance between them both, until she was ready to strike at her opponent’s torso. She had no intention of prolonging this exchange—she would finish this as quickly as possible.

*“Rrgh!”*

Percival fired another volley from her handguns to deflect her attack. The ability to deflect her strike with bullets alone put her

skill on par with Saya's, but to Kirin, that wouldn't be a problem. She had already initiated the New Conjoined Cranes.

However—

"Not so fast!"

"Huh…?!"

With the handgun gripped in her right hand, Percival sent the Hiinamaru recoiling backward. Then, taking advantage of the momentary opening, she pressed the handgun in her left hand against Kirin's abdomen.

*"Ugh…!"*

The bullets of light tore through the air without mercy, drilling deep into the ground.

It was only thanks to the fact that she had foreseen her foe's actions with her clairvoyance that Kirin had been able to dodge the barrage by a hair's breadth. In close combat, where a fraction of a second could mean the difference between victory and defeat, life and death, even the slightest hesitation could prove fatal. In that respect, Percival's ability to attack almost instantaneously was a grave nuisance.

But what had Kirin most astonished was the fact that she had been able to break through the New Conjoined Cranes so easily.

"Surprised? As I told you a moment ago, my eyes can see the truth among all falsehoods. That means that I can see through every stroke of your weapon, too," Percival explained calmly.

"…I see," Kirin answered as she fell back.

The purpose of the Conjoined Cranes was to control one's most minute movements, including one's breathing, timing, and vision, to create a one-sided situation in which one's opponent was prevented from countering. In other words, that meant launching into an endless sequence of feints. If Percival could see through that, then even the New Conjoined Cranes was as-yet imperfect.

"In short, I'm the perfect opponent for facing you. That's why D appointed me to carry out this task."

"…"

By the sound of it, the Golden Bough Alliance had anticipated her coming here.

Kirin heaved a short sigh, lowering the Hiinamaru outstretched at her side. "That doesn't matter," she answered. "My blade is more than just the Cranes!"

It was true that the Toudou style's essence was movement

combination. However, that wasn't all that her own swordsmanship had to offer. All she needed was one swing, one thrust of her blade in which she had poured her entire being. That was what Ayato's father, Masatsugu, had taught her.

There could be no mistaking that Percival's technique with her handguns was extraordinarily precise, nor could the daunting nature of her power to see through her moves be called into doubt. Kirin had no idea how her opponent had changed so significantly since the Gryps, but changed she most clearly had. She was obviously stronger now, more agile, more formidable.

But even so, Kirin wasn't about to let herself lose.

She had been taken by surprise when Percival had first broken through the New Conjoined Cranes, but even without that technique, she still had the advantage when it came to close combat.

To her surprise, Percival was quick to recognize the same thing: "Indeed. If we keep this up, I suspect you'll defeat me sooner or later. My specialty is supporting others from behind, after all."

“In that case, won’t you surrender?”

Percival, however, her expression blank, shook her head. “Of course not. Didn’t I tell you? I was ordered to face you, and I’ve prepared in advance to do just that.”

As she spoke, a thunderous roar erupted from above their heads.

“Wha—?!”

Her reflexes taking over, Kirin leaped backward as a huge shape came crashing down from the ceiling, the massive figure gouging into the floor and sending fragments of concrete and dust flying.

But she had scanned her surroundings before entering the warehouse. There shouldn’t have been anyone else there besides Percival and her.

*Another member of the Golden Bough Alliance…?*

She strained her eyes in suspicion and caught sight of two red lights glowing uncannily amid the dust.

The second she made eye contact, she understood.

There was no way she could have sensed this creature.

After all, it wasn’t even human.

“That’s…not Ardy. But it’s the same design, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s a new-and-improved mass-production model.”

As Percival spoke, the puppet stepped forward, revealing its full body. It was indeed very similar to the autonomous puppet that Kirin had fought against so fiercely in her semifinals match during the Phoenix, and while the designs and colors of some of its parts looked to be slightly different, its overall figure was remarkably alike. The same thing went for the giant hammer grasped in its hands.

That said, she didn’t feel as if she was now staring at the same kind of overwhelming opponent she had faced during the tournament. Ardy had been fiercely intimidating, but this puppet was clearly less so. Rather, it’s profound silence gave it quite the opposite effect.

Kirin knew immediately why that was.

“This puppet doesn’t have a sense of self, does it?”

“Of course not,” Percival replied bluntly. “Weapons don’t need personalities. We call it a Valiant—the ultimate autonomous battle puppet.”

“I see…,” Kirin murmured—when the puppet, the Valiant, came swiftly hurtling toward her.

She dodged backward to avoid the oncoming hammer. She’d swung around its right-hand side when a loathingly familiar wall of light appeared out of nowhere, blocking her way.

“It’s got a defensive barrier, too…?!”

“Indeed. Although, given that it isn’t powered by urm-manadite, it isn’t as powerful as the original.”

In that case, Kirin realized, she would have to change course.

The Valiant’s hammer came hurtling toward her from the side. It was an accurate, faultless attack, very similar to Percival’s own. It proceeded to launch into a chain of consecutive strikes, one powerful blow after the next, all without interruption.

“Your clairvoyance, Kirin Toudou, relies on your being able to visually read the flow of your opponent’s prana—which means that it’s completely ineffective against a foe that doesn’t possess any prana whatsoever.”

In other words, this was a highly calculated strategy designed specifically for her.

“…Hmm.”

Kirin, however, responded with no more than a slight frown as she countered with the Hiinamaru.

The Valiant deployed another defensive barrier to hold her at bay—but with a quick adjustment of her aim and a glimmer of silver light, she slipped through that shield and sent the puppet’s left arm falling effortlessly to the ground.

At this, Percival, watching on from the sidelines, began to look slightly ill at ease. “Just what kind of monster is that blade of yours…? How did you manage to slip through its shield? Or cut through solid steel so easily?”

Kirin glanced at the Valiant as it fell back before shaking off the thick oil-like liquid that now dripped from the Hiinamaru with a graceful flourish.

“Unfortunately, this puppet doesn’t quite live up to the original,” she responded. “It can clearly fight, but unlike Ardy, it doesn’t *know* how to fight. It may be able to use that weapon, it may have speed and power, but it will never pose a real threat. Fancy tech alone isn’t enough. If I were you, I would instruct that revised model to withdraw.”

“…Hmph. I’ll inform D of your assessment,” Percival replied

with an unexpectedly frank nod. “But the others won’t be withdrawing.”

“The others?”

“Didn’t I tell you? They’re mass-produced.”

As Percival spoke, another figure, identical to the last Valiant, jumped down from the gaping hole in the ceiling.

And it wasn’t alone. Several more joined it, a veritable waterfall of human shapes, until Kirin was faced with five of the autonomous puppets in total.

“One might not be enough, but maybe this will do it?”

*

The thick, leaden clouds that concealed the moon and stars began to let forth a cold winter rain.

“Hyaaaaaaaaaa!”

Kirin lashed out with a low strike, but as she did so, several defensive barriers each activated simultaneously, repelling her blade. In the meantime, one Valiant, having circled around behind her, began to bring down its hammer from overhead. She rolled to the side, sending a splash of water flying, only to find yet another one lying in wait for her. She swept her blade to the side to knock its hammer away, but with it deploying yet more defensive barriers, she was unable to proceed.

If she were facing them one by one, she was confident that they wouldn’t be able to put up too much of a challenge—but facing all five at once, and, moreover, given their expert coordination, they were proving to be quite a nuisance. But even so, given enough time, she should have been able to turn the situation in her favor.

That would have been true, of course, if not for Percival.

*“A halo of mercy and atonement I give to thee.”*

Each time that dispassionate voice let forth those words, they would be followed by a torrent of golden light.

Kirin threw herself into the air, using the defensive barriers deployed by the Valiants as footholds to escape the deluge. However, with the lake at her back, there was no clear avenue of retreat.

Anyone mowed down by the flood of that Orga Lux, Percival’s Amalthean Goat, would find themselves knocked instantly unconscious. There was no means of defending against it.

On top of that, the Valiants, lacking consciousness to begin with, were completely immune to its effects. Taking advantage of this fact, they, along with Percival, had her cornered. Their timing was superbly accurate, as was their accuracy. Percival, meanwhile, was providing logistical support as the puppets worked together to drive her into a corner. Indeed, Percival's skill fighting at the rearguard was even more unnerving than she had let on.

Forced onto the defensive, Kirin had been driven outside the warehouse and into the beating rain. She had yet to be overcome by the joint abilities of her six opponents, but at this rate, it was only a matter of time before she was.

*I'm going to have to use the Fudaraku… But no, if I do that…!*

She turned her attention to the other weapon at her waist—her Orga Lux—but quickly pulled back.

The Fudaraku's unique ability lay in its power to accumulate energy over time—the longer that energy was stored, the sharper and more powerful it would become. However, if too much was accumulated, it would become uncontrollable (based on her previous tests, she had been able to use three months' worth of accumulated energy without issue). Right now, she had close to four months' worth accumulated.

If she was to use it now, she would undoubtedly have little difficulty escaping from her current predicament—it would be more than enough, she suspected, to defeat not only the Valiants but Percival, too.

And yet, she was hesitating. She couldn't shake the thought that what the Golden Bough really wanted right now was to force her to waste the Fudaraku's conserved power. After all, it was common knowledge that the weapon was in her possession, and given the foundations' obligation to disclose all relevant information on their urm-manadite stockpiles, it was likely that the Alliance had surmised its potential.

They had lured her here. They had expected her to come. They were no doubt aware that, given her and the others' present circumstances, only she would have been able to come to Seven. And if they could eliminate her as a threat here, or at the very least force her to waste the Fudaraku's reserve, that would deal a severe blow to their abilities to combat them. That was the only possible explanation.

If Claudia was right, then the Golden Bough Alliance was

preparing something big to coincide with the Lindvolus. And if that was true, then they needed to keep the Fudaraku up their sleeve.

If the only person in jeopardy was she herself, Kirin wouldn't have hesitated to use the Orga Lux. But that wasn't the case. Right now, the fate of someone she valued even more than herself was at stake.

Nonetheless, if she was to be defeated here, they would have ended up losing everything anyway.

*Just what am I supposed to do…?*

"That's sloppy of you."

"*Ngh!* Oops…!"

Percival wasn't one to overlook her brief moment of hesitation.

It didn't look like she'd had time to fully charge the Amalthean Goat, but that didn't stop her from unleashing a barrage of bullets with her two handguns.

For Kirin, deflecting those bullets of light wasn't difficult, but at the exact same moment, two Valiants came descending upon her from either side.

*This is bad…!*

She ran through a countless number of possible escape routes in her mind as she deflected Percival's continued bombardment, but none showed promise. Even if she managed to stave off one attack, she would be defenseless against the next. On top of that, all it would take would be one mistake, and she would lose her prized Hiinamaru.

The only option remaining was to minimize the damage as much as possible…

She resolved to do what she had to, when—

*"Pēn!"*

At that moment, the ground beneath her swayed violently, and with a tremendous clang, the Valiant by her right-hand side was sent flying.

"—?!"

Confused, she jumped sideways to evade the hammer of the remaining Valiant and then quickly reevaluated her situation.

Amid the heavy downpour, the figure of a man—tall, with a sturdy, robust build, garbed in a ragged hood and carrying slumped over his shoulder an equally tattered sack—had placed himself between her and Percival.

The ground beneath him was heavily indented.

Judging by his actions, it looked like he had come to rescue her from her dilemma.

"I hope I'm not interfering? I would have remained on the sidelines if this were any normal contest…but that doesn't look to be the case."

Kirin glanced up in surprise at the sound of that familiar voice.

"No, thank you, Xiaohui Wu."

Did that face, once he removed his worn hood, look somehow gentler than she remembered it being when she had fought against him over a year ago? With the way he had grown out his hair, he looked at first glance like a completely different person.

But there could be no mistaking that tempered physique, nor the overwhelming sense of power that flowed through him. Indeed, that power looked to have increased considerably compared to what Kirin remembered.

"Xiaohui Wu… Jie Long's Celestial Warrior. Why are you here?" Percival demanded with a glance toward the fallen Valiant.

Hardly anything more remained of the puppet than loose parts.

Xiaohui didn't look to be carrying any weapons. That wasn't particularly surprising, given that he was a martial artist. He had likely caused that tremor she had felt a moment ago using nothing more than the strength of his legs. On top of that, however, he had somehow managed to break through the Valiants' defensive barriers using no more than his bare hands.

"Huh…?"

At that moment, Kirin's keen eyes noticed an unusually dense quantity of prana focused through his arms—of a quality she had never seen before.

"Why am I here? I'm just passing through. I'm returning from a journey to improve my skills. If I'm not back in Rikka by tomorrow, I'll miss my first match."

"Then please, don't let us delay you." Percival's voice remained calm, but there was a clear edge to it now.

That was understandable—Kirin was ready to admit that her foe had been on the cusp of victory.

"On my pride as a warrior, I'm afraid I owe this young lady a debt," Xiaohui replied with a smile. "I won't allow her to be felled until I can face her again."

Yes, there was no mistaking that he had changed since she had last met him.

The next moment, an air-window suddenly popped open by Percival's side, from which came a mechanical voice disguising the speaker's identity: "*It's time. Abandon Plan E and move to Plan G.*"

"But, D, I can't—"

*"Are you telling me you're disobeying your master?"*

"…Understood." Percival let out a weak sigh, fixing Kirin and Xiaohui with a sharp glare before turning her back. "We'll see each other again."

"Wait!"

Kirin began to chase after her in pursuit, when one of the Valiants moved to block her path.

There was only the one of them, and she should have been able to cut it down without incident—but no sooner did she think this than her hair stood on end.

A second later, a light flashed from within the Valiant's body, followed by a deafening explosion that sent shrapnel flying in every direction.

*"Guh!"*

She focused her prana to minimize the damage, but by the time the dust had settled, Percival and the remaining Valiants were nowhere to be seen.

"It would seem that she's escaped," Xiaohui said, his tone of voice uninterested, as he lifted his ragged hood once more and took off in the opposite direction, his gaze fixed on the lake.

"U-um, thank you again!"

Sheathing the Hiinamaru, Kirin gave him a deep, formal bow. There could be no denying that, without his help, she would have been in serious trouble.

"Don't worry about it. I meant what I said. I look forward to a rematch with you… It's a shame you aren't entering the Lindvolus."

"…Seeing you now, I don't know whether I'd be able to hold my own against you anymore."

That wasn't humility—she honestly thought that.

When they had fought each other during the Gryps, there had been an insurmountable difference in ability between the two. If Ayato hadn't been fighting alongside her, she doubted she would have been able to overcome it.

Thanks to her clairvoyance, she had managed, barely, to deal the winning blow—but while that may have constituted victory according to the rules of the tournament, she didn't feel as if she

had truly been able to defeat him.

And while she may have continued her training over the past year, while she may have accumulated more experience and further developed her technique, the same could no doubt be said about Xiaohui, too.

*But I wonder what my chances would be if I used the Fudaraku…?*

"Well then, it's time for me to go. I need to return to Jie Long as soon as possible."

"Ah… But there won't be any boats heading out at this time of night. And besides, only cargo vessels stop at Seven…"

The waterside cities that served as the gateway to Asterisk dotted half of the lake in a wide arc, but due to customs restrictions and the like, cargo vessels weren't permitted to carry passengers.

Kirin had made her way here on a miniature craft of her own, but it was only large enough to accommodate one person.

"That won't be a problem," Xiaohui replied over his shoulder, casually stepping out into the water.

"Wha—?!" Kirin chased after him, only to find him focusing his prana beneath his feet and standing not in but atop the dark surface.

"Don't tell me *this* is how you're planning to go back…?"

Only a Genestella with truly outstanding control over their prana would have been able to focus it in such a way as to literally walk on water without any advance preparation. Xiaohui certainly met that criterion. However, doing so would quickly exhaust one's prana, and it would be incredibly difficult to maintain the effect over a moving surface. To put it plainly, it was pure madness to try to walk all the way to Asterisk.

"It will be faster to go on foot directly rather than taking a long detour, no? That's how I've made my way this far. While it shames me to say it, I don't have much in the way of a travel budget… Or rather, I've used it all up."

"This far…? Where exactly did you go?"

"Europe," Xiaohui answered simply, before giving her a quick wave and disappearing into the darkness of the night.

Kirin could only stare after his disappearing figure in mute astonishment.

*This year's Lindvolus really is filled with amazing people…*

Even now, a part of her wanted to try to find a way to enter the tournament—but knowing that it was impossible, she reaffirmed

her determination to help Ayato in whatever way she could.

No matter where she was, no matter what her situation, she would put everything she had into being there for him when he needed her.

Because that was the only option available to her now.

# CHAPTER 8
# COUNTER-PREPARATIONS

When Ayato arrived at the room at the Hotel Elnath, Saya and Sylvia were already waiting for him.

"Well, howdy there, Ayato. Welcome."

"Thanks for coming, Ayato."

Both Saya, lying flopped down and disheveled on the sofa as she munched a snack, and Sylvia, brewing a pot of tea, greeted him.

They had all come for one of their regular meetings to discuss the Golden Bough Alliance—although, strictly speaking, the meeting wasn't scheduled to begin for a short while yet.

"You too. And congratulations on making it through the preliminaries as well," Ayato replied warmly.

Grinning, Saya and Sylvia exchanged gleeful glances.

"It was nothing."

"The same goes for you, Ayato. Congratulations!"

"Ha-ha, thanks."

As it happened, he, too, had safely made it through the third round of the preliminaries yesterday and, like the others, had qualified for the main tournament.

They had already called to offer their congratulations after each match, but there was something different about conveying them face-to-face.

"It was tougher than I expected, though, given that they were just the preliminaries. There's something different about the entrants this time around compared to the Phoenix and the Gryps, like they've got a different mindset when it comes to combat."

"Right?" Sylvia answered. "I get the impression that there are a

lot more high-end opponents this time around."

"Oh? I had an easy time of it, though." Saya, on the other hand, flashed them both a triumphant grin.

"Well… I suppose your matches *were* all over and done with relatively quickly," Ayato remarked.

There weren't many people who were capable of withstanding a direct hit from one of her Luxes.

"You were probably also lucky in your pairings, though, I think."

"How rude. It's a simple fact. I cruised through to victory, while you almost lost your first match, and Sylvia was put in a difficult situation in her match against Priscilla."

"Well, I can't deny that…"

"Ha-ha, what can I say…?"

Both Ayato and Sylvia could do little but exchange embarrassed grins.

Certainly, their respective performances spoke for themselves.

"Ah, speaking of which… Have you seen the bracket for the main tournament?"

"Of course."

Today was the very middle of the Lindvolus, with no matches scheduled. It was also the day when the bracket for the main tournament was drawn, and the announcement had been made just a short time ago.

"That's…," Sylvia began, when—

"Phew… Thank you for coming, everyone. Are we all here?" As the door swung open, Claudia, wearing a large coat, entered the room.

As Seidoukan Academy's student council president, Claudia had been required to attend the drawing of the tournament bracket, so she must have hurried here right after it had finished.

"C-congratulations, everyone!" Behind her stood Kirin, having accompanied her to the Sirius Dome.

After sneaking into Seven the other day, she probably wanted to report what she had found directly to Claudia prior to the meeting. So far, Ayato had only heard the basic facts.

"It's good to see you both. But, er, what about Helga, Haruka, and Isabella? Aren't we still waiting for them…?" Ayato asked, before he found himself widening his eyes in shock.

After Kirin came another, completely unexpected individual.

“Yo! Congrats!”

“E-Eishirou…?”

Saya and Sylvia looked back and forth with suspicion at both Claudia and the always-jovial Eishirou.

“Yes, I understand your concerns,” Claudia continued. “If you’ll allow me to explain…”

*

Late the previous night—

Eishirou found himself shivering as he made his way through the dark courtyard at Seidoukan Academy, lit only by a few distant lampposts.

While he had been trained to withstand cold temperatures, that didn’t mean he couldn’t feel the biting chill. The wintry air was enough to seep deep into one’s bones. He rubbed his hands together, wanting nothing more than to get this little errand over with, when he spotted a figure standing in front of the gazebo.

“Yo,” he greeted. “Did I keep you waiting?”

The figure—Seidoukan Academy’s student council president, Claudia Enfield—broke into a broad smile. “Not at all. You’re right on time, Yabuki.”

“So what is it? It must be pretty important if you’re gonna call me out here at this hour right when you’re so busy.”

If she had merely wanted to provide Eishirou with normal instructions as a member of Shadowstar, Seidoukan’s covert intelligence organization, then the regular private line would have sufficed. In other words, seeing as she desired to discuss it with him in person, what she wanted clearly wasn’t typical.

“Indeed, it’s very important.” Still smiling, Claudia reached into her coat with both hands and pulled out the Pan-Dora, activating it. The twin blades let off an ominous glint, drawing a glowing arc through the air like falling meteors.

“Wha—?! H-h-hold on a sec! What’re you doing, Prez?! Did I do something wrong?!” Flustered, he stepped backward, raising his hands into the air to show that he meant no harm.

“As you said, I’m very busy. So let’s dispense with the pleasantries, shall we?”

“…What is it?” Eishirou asked timidly, still shrinking backward.

“I’m not going to beat around the bush. Yabuki, who did you

tell about Kirin's whereabouts? About her going to Seven?"

"Huh…?" Eishirou found himself at a loss for words. "Um, er, what do you mean, exactly…?"

"I thought I told you that we were dispensing with the pleasantries, Yabuki?" Claudia said, thrusting the tip of one of the Pan-Dora's twin blades dangerously close to his nose.

"Er, I mean…"

He glanced left and right uncertainly, but Claudia wasn't one to let down her guard.

"I've always known that you've accepted private assignments on the side, Yabuki. But you're not the kind of person to slip up and leave any evidence behind."

"No, no, you think too highly of me…"

As it happened, despite being a member of Shadowstar, Eishirou *had* been secretly accepting work from his own private network of contacts. He liked to think of it as freelancing. Of course, no agent of any intelligence organization would ever be permitted to do such a thing, but he had never left anything behind that could have been traced back to him…or so he had thought.

"I do respect your humility. Indeed, that's precisely why I place so much stock in you."

"…Huh?"

"When you agree to a job, it doesn't matter to you whether it implicates your friends or even a lover. Am I right?"

"…"

Eishirou fell silent. What Claudia had said was correct, in a sense.

What he wanted most in his work was the ability to enjoy himself. If a prospective job met that standard, then he would accept it, no matter what it might entail.

He always wanted to live life as leisurely as possible. He treasured his friends—and lovers, too, if he had any—and, of course, felt a sense of obligation and duty toward them, but at the same time, they were also something of a burden. And if you're weighed down, you can't easily enjoy life. That was why, every now and then, he would put them aside so he could enjoy the present moment.

"I wouldn't exactly call you ruthless, but it *is* an excellent quality for an agent like yourself." Still holding the Pan-Dora in front of his face, Claudia gradually drew closer, forcing him to step

backward. “So I wouldn’t normally hold it against you. After all, I’ve also made use of your services on occasion. However…this time is different. I’m serious. This time, I’m talking to you not as Seidoukan Academy’s student council president, but as the individual Claudia Enfield.”

“Ha-ha-ha…” He pulled a stiff smile, trying to convince her to ease up, but he knew that it wouldn’t save him this time.

Because she was right. He had taken on an assignment to monitor their movements—hers and the others’, too. And as part of that, he had reported that Kirin was en route to Seven.

“W-well, okay! Let’s say I did do it! Hypothetically. Let’s say I did take on the job… If I were to give up the client, you’d go easy on me, right…? I mean, come on, Prez, you know what it’s like. In this line of work, nobody follows the rules all the time, you know?”

Of course, he knew that if he was to reveal the identity of one of his clients, he would probably never be able to find work again.

“Hee-hee. Of course I understand,” Claudia replied with a light chuckle. “So how about this? You will give up your freelance work and take instructions only from me.”

“Ah…”

Eishirou knew that he was in no position to protest her proposal.

What she wanted was to cut him off from all external clients and pull him into her own circle.

*I suppose she timed this on purpose…?*

He’d had a basic idea of what she was doing for a while now, having indirectly picked up dribs and drabs from his conversations with Ayato. He had understood, too, that she had known about his side business as well but had been willing to overlook it so she could rely on his services when she herself required them.

Why then, having called him out like this, was she willing to overlook his actions? He had assumed she had still seen some utility value in keeping him around, but judging by the present situation, it appeared he had been mistaken.

But no, she had waited until the situation had completely ripened so she could harvest him for herself—and by doing so, acquire vital information on her enemies, eliminate one of their pieces, and fortify her position.

“…Well played, Prez,” Eishirou murmured, his expression softening. “But there’s something I don’t get. You said I’m not the

kind of person to leave evidence behind. In that case…?"

"Indeed. Regrettably, I had no direct evidence. You truly are outstanding, Yabuki. But unfortunately for you…I don't need proof."

At that moment, a cold shiver shooting down his spine, Eishirou leaped backward.

"…!"

"Oh? Whatever is the matter?" Her broad smile remained unchanging, but it was clear that raw bloodlust was flowing through her body. As they came flying toward him, her twin blades glowed eerily in the dark night like stray wisps.

"You're serious, Prez…?"

"I told you that right from the start, didn't I?"

"…I guess I've got no choice, then." Eishirou grasped the knife-type Lux that he always kept available at his waist, readying himself—or at least pretending to.

"Take that!" he cried out, slamming the smoke bomb that he had been hiding into the ground.

These kinds of old-fashioned techniques never grew outdated. The smoke bomb was an old ninja tool mass-produced at his home village, the white smoke that erupted from it engulfing the whole area in less than a second and hiding his movements even from most digital sensors.

*There's no way I'd be able to win against her…*

Claudia may have used up most of the Pan-Dora's stock during the Gryps, but more than a year had passed since then. He might have had a chance if he could have taken her by surprise, but he knew there was no chance whatsoever that he would be able to triumph in a direct fight.

The best thing for him to do now would be to make his escape and lie low for a while. He could think about his next moves later.

But as he tried to flee, something appeared out of the corner of his eyes, tripping him up and sending him tumbling to the ground.

"Eh…? *Gah…?!*"

Lying facedown, he felt something sharp press against his back.

In terrified shock, he waited for the smoke to clear, until finally he could make out Claudia standing over him with an elegant smile.

"H-how…?"

He had used the smoke bomb in an attempt to counter her precognition ability. Given that she could see into the future (but

only in the literal sense), his only hope of escape, he had reasoned, would be to obstruct her vision. It should have been flawless. He himself knew the grounds of the academy like the back of his hand, enough so that he could get away without being able to see and had countless escape routes already planned out.

Of course, if she could test future outcomes hundreds of times over, the likelihood of finding a winning course of action wasn't zero, but that kind of blind trial and error should have exhausted her stock in no time at all. Even if she had begun using her ability before he had thrown the smoke bomb, she still shouldn't have been able to use it to stop his escape.

At least, that was what he had thought.

"Heh… This is a bit rough, huh…?"

For some reason he couldn't fathom, Claudia's face was twisted in pain. Perhaps she was fatigued or injured, but even so, she wasn't the kind of person to normally let her emotions show so plainly.

"…What exactly did you just do, Prez?"

"I'm afraid that's a secret," she replied with a forced smile as she crossed her blades over either side of his neck. Was she planning to shear his head clean off?

"Do you know the other reason why I think so highly of you, Yabuki?"

"I—I haven't got the faintest clue…"

In his present situation, it would be unwise to crack a joke.

"Because you'll always put yourself first, no matter what… Just like I used to." With this, her perennial smile completely vanished. "Normally, we would expect an agent of Shadowstar—no, any agent from any intelligence organization—to prioritize completing their mission and guarding their secrets to the last. That's precisely why we entrust them with such vital work."

That went without saying. Le Wolfe's Grimalkin was practically the very epitome of that selfless ethic.

"But you don't like such individuals, do you, Yabuki? I think it's fair to say that you even despise them."

"…Well, I can't argue with that."

Indeed, that was why he had left his home village in the first place.

"If I was a third-rate villain in some movie, I wonder what I would say right now? '*Spit it out! Tell me what I want to know, and I'll let you live*,' maybe?"

"…And I would say '*Never*,' I suppose… Haah, I get it. You've got me beat. I'll talk."

As Claudia had said, if Eishirou were a typical agent, he would never be willing to break his silence.

But he wasn't a typical agent—he was, when it came down to it, Eishirou Yabuki, and that meant something very different.

"Very good," Claudia replied, nodding with satisfaction.

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"And so Yabuki will be joining us starting now. Let's not hold against him the fact that he was selling information on his friends."

"Thanks for that, really," Eishirou said in his usual frivolous tone as he bowed his head. "I'm looking forward to working with you all!"

"…"

Ayato, who had been sitting for a while now in mute silence, watched as Saya creased her brow in a frown—and then, all of a sudden, pulled out a gargantuan gun-type Lux, aiming it directly at their classmate.

"One shot won't hurt, will it?"

"H-hold on, hold on, Sasamiya! I— I'm sorry! I really am!" Having turned deathly pale, Eishirou raised his empty hands into the air in supplication.

"I understand your feelings, Saya, but please, lower your weapon," Claudia said, cutting through the hostile atmosphere.

"But it's *his* fault that Kirin was almost…," Saya murmured darkly.

"I— I'm okay, really," Kirin interjected, flustered. "Anyway, Mr. Yabuki should have all kinds of useful information to offer us…"

At this, Saya reluctantly deactivated her Lux.

"Indeed, that's what matters most right now. Won't you tell us all again who you informed about Kirin's going to Seven, Yabuki?" Claudia asked politely.

"…It was the Tyrant."

"!"

At the sound of that name, a tense current coursed through the room.

The Tyrant—Le Wolfe Black Institute's student council president, Dirk Eberwein. It was he who had directed Irene and

Priscilla to enter the Phoenix and who—although Ayato and the others had no direct proof—had in all likelihood ordered Flora's abduction. Ayato's fate seemed to be closely linked to the man.

"So you're saying that Dirk is part of the Golden Bough Alliance?" Sylvia asked sharply.

"It would seem that way." Claudia nodded seriously.

"Ah… That *will* be a nuisance." Sylvia let out a weary sigh.

With both Claudia and Sylvia being student council presidents at their respective schools, they both knew how problematic Dirk would be to deal with.

"I guess it's fair to say that it's not Le Wolfe itself but Dirk Eberwein who's involved in it, then?" Ayato asked.

"That's my mother's assessment, too. And I concur. It would simply be too risky for a foundation to get involved with this kind of thing," Claudia answered with a forced smile.

Her mother, Isabella, along with Helga, the captain of the city guard, and Ayato's sister, Haruka, were all absent from the meeting due to their busy schedules.

"Hmm… In that case, can we rule out Gallardworth and Allekant having any involvement?" Sylvia asked.

"Ah, you mean Agrestia and those autonomous puppets? I suspect that the schools aren't directly involved there, either."

"What makes you so sure? Gardner was using the Holy Grail, no? Gallardworth doesn't even allow private battles, and they sure wouldn't let someone use one of their Orga Luxes in one," Sylvia pointed out.

At this, Claudia turned toward Eishirou.

"Right, right," he began. "Er, I looked into it. It sounds like our friend Percival Gardner went missing a few months ago. Taking the Holy Grail with her. Officially, they're saying she's taken a leave of absence, but Sinodomius has been busy frantically trying to track her down."

"That being the case, I think we can safely rule out any direct involvement on the part of Gallardworth. I'm going to have Eishirou look into Agrestia a bit more himself. If push comes to shove, we can use it as leverage against the academy."

"…All right. That sounds reasonable," Sylvia replied.

Saya raised her hand. "What about Allekant, then? Kirin said that those puppets were almost identical to Ardy. In that case…" She fell silent there, her expression grave.

“Indeed. Putting the school itself aside, we can’t rule out the possibility that their Pygmalion faction is cooperating with the Golden Bough Alliance. That said, Pygmalion’s leader, Ernesta Kühne, seems to be fixated on creating puppets with humanlike emotions, thoughts, and the ability to grow. But from what Kirin reported, those puppets were more akin to mass-produced weapons, no?”

“Hmm…”

“And hasn’t she introduced a new autonomous puppet for the Lindvolus? What was its name again…? Lenaty?”

“Yep. That was pretty sneaky. You can’t afford to let yourself be fooled by its looks.”

Listening to Saya, Ayato imagined that puppet, almost indistinguishable from a flesh-and-blood young girl. She had cruised through the preliminaries with her overwhelming attack power and mobility, but he suspected she hadn’t yet revealed her full battle potential.

“Hmm… Ernesta does seem like quite the pragmatist. She might have simply offered some of her technology to them? Although, I suppose that if that was the case, we can’t really say she’s not involved, then, can we?”

“Th-the Golden Bough Alliance has an Orga Lux that can brainwash people, though, right? They might be manipulating them, then…”

Ayato nodded. Sylvia’s and Kirin’s explanations made sense.

“Right. In that case, the Varda-Vaos may be controlling Agrestia or Dirk…,” Ayato murmured.

“Ah, I don’t know about Agrestia, but something tells me that’s not the case for the Tyrant.”

“Yep, I doubt it.”

Claudia and Sylvia were quick to challenge his suggestion.

“There’s no manipulating that one.”

“Not at all.”

The two nodded to each other as if sharing an inside secret.

“Anyway, let’s have Yabuki look into the situation at Allekant as well.”

“Good grief, cut me some slack,” Eishirou replied with an exaggerated shrug.

“But…it sounds like we’ve just stumbled on too many clues all at once. It doesn’t make sense,” Saya said suspiciously as she sat

deep in thought, her arms crossed.

"That's… I think so, too." Kirin looked to be equally doubtful. "Could they be trying to lure us into a trap?"

"We have to consider that possibility as well. However, we should probably expect them to leave behind more clues as their plans move further along. They've been lying in wait for the most part, until now. And as powerful as the Varda-Vaos is, she—I'll call it *she* for convenience's sake—seems to have been making frequent journeys in and out of Asterisk. I haven't been able to work out what she's doing outside the city just yet, but the group's ability to conceal itself drops markedly while she's away. The fact that they're coming out into the open now in spite of that suggests that their plans are coming to a head."

"You say they don't mind revealing their plans a little… But what exactly is this Golden Bough Alliance trying to do?"

But of course, none of them could answer Ayato's question.

While they were coming close to pulling back the curtain on the organization, they still had no real idea what their ultimate endgame was. If they knew that, they might have been able to find a better way to deal with them.

"Putting all that aside, the main tournament starts tomorrow. Everyone taking part should focus on that first," Claudia said with a decisive clap, changing the subject.

"R-right," Kirin added, clapping her own hands together lightly. "Especially now that you've all made it through the preliminaries. I'm just glad to see that Saya and Sylvia have been allocated to a different block than Ayato."

"It's a relief. If everything goes well, I'll be able to fight Rimcy in the quarterfinals. I won't get in Ayato's way."

"And all *I* want is to fight Orphelia in the quarterfinals, so it's fine with me, too."

Ayato needed to secure for himself the ultimate victory, but all Saya and Sylvia wanted was to defeat certain opponents. In that regard, the bracket had worked out in their favor.

However—

"B-but if Ayato's going to take the crown, then…," Kirin began.

"Indeed… He may end up fighting Julis in the semifinals," Claudia finished for her.

Both Ayato and Julis had been allocated to the same block, so assuming they both made it through all their matches, they would

end up facing each other in the semifinals. There was no escaping that fact, given how the lottery had been drawn. On top of that, Julis's goal in the tournament was to defeat Orphelia, but in order to do that, she would need to go through Ayato first.

He didn't want to fight her, if he could help it.

He couldn't say that he fully understood her situation, but he could see that she was willing to bet everything on this opportunity.

And yet, as Haruka's life depended on his own victory, he couldn't relent, either.

"Well, let's just focus on what we know is ahead of us, Ayato," Sylvia said, patting him on the back. "Both of our matches are tomorrow, after all."

"…Right," he replied, flashing her a grateful smile.

"I'm up against…someone from Le Wolfe," Sylvia began. "From what I've seen, they aren't quite at Priscilla's level. I won't let my guard down, though."

"And I'm… What a bother. Why do I have to get this kind of opponent right from the get-go?" In contrast to Sylvia, Saya's expression was clouded. "Allekant's Ningirsu. He'll be a tough one."

"Ah… He's strong; there's no arguing that. He just keeps jumping up in the rankings lately." Sylvia nodded, patting Saya on the shoulder.

"In other words…"

"…He must be training at the Liangshan."

"Eep…" Saya's expression turned dangerously pale.

"Do your best, both of you," Claudia said with a warm chuckle. "And, Ayato, you'll be facing…" She paused there, glancing toward the bracket on her mobile device.

"Minato Wakamiya, it looks like," Kirin finished for her.

Ayato was very familiar with the name. Indeed, it was almost as if they had some kind of fated connection. He also knew she had been training at the Liangshan, too.

Sylvia's expression suddenly turned serious. "Watch your back, Ayato. As Queenvale's student council president, maybe I shouldn't be saying this, but I'll be behind you all the way. Just remember… Minato's gotten strong. Really strong."

"…Yeah, I know," he answered, clenching his fists.

# CHAPTER 9
# ROUND FOUR

"*Haah*… I'm so nervous!"

Minato Wakamiya was pacing back and forth in her prep room at the Sirius Dome.

"…Calm down a little, Minato." Remonstrating her in a cool voice was her composed teammate Chloe Flockhart.

"That's right, Minato. You won't be able to show them everything you've got if you work yourself up. Act natural." With a warm smile, Yuzuhi Renjouji, the most relaxed of all of them, gave her a gentle pat on the back.

"R-r-r-r-really, Minato! E-even if he managed to smash through my brother, you've been training under Xinglou, right? H-have a bit of confidence!" Her words may have been encouraging, but Sophia Fairclough looked even more nervous than Minato herself, the teacup and saucer in her hand clattering so loudly that it seemed like they might shatter at any moment.

"Y-you'll be fine! I mean, you've got me—you've got all of us, Minato!" Nina Achenwall, normally the most timid, had taken her hands firmly in her own.

"R-right. Yeah! Thanks, everyone!"

Thanks to her friends, the tension gripping her had subsided somewhat.

"Well, we've still got time before the match. If you need a distraction, why don't we watch some of the others?" Chloe suggested, opening an air-window through her mobile device.

Almost instantaneously, a fierce battle spread out before them.

"By the way…I thought Minato and Ayato's match was

supposed to be the first one? Why have the others started earlier?" Yuzuhi asked.

"Ah, they keep the most popular time slot for the main stage here. They want to keep everything balanced between the different venues, you know? It was like that in the preliminaries, too," Chloe answered, clearly disinterested.

"Yeah…"

Minato turned her gaze to the match playing in the air-window, when all of a sudden something stood out to her.

"Hey, hey, look! Everyone! Look!"

She had taken the first seat in front of the air-window, beckoning for the others to come.

The others glanced toward one another in confusion, before going to join her.

"What's going on?"

"It's Le Wolfe's number eighteen and Seidoukan's number nine. They fought against each other in the Phoenix, too, right…?"

"Not that—look! The way they're moving!" Minato pointed to the air-window, until, after a second, the others seemed to realize it, too.

"Oh…!"

Surprise was plastered over all four of their faces.

"Yep, I was right! See how they're moving, how they're fighting? They've both been training with Xinglou!"

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"Hrraaaaaaaaaaagh!"

"Hyaaaaaaaaaaaagh!"

Two thunderous roars echoed throughout the arena as power collided with power.

The first—Lester MacPhail, alias Kornephoros—lashed out with his gargantuan ax-type Lux, the Bardiche-Leo.

The other—Irene Urzaiz—used her bare hands to thrust his weapon aside.

This contest, on the stage in the Canopus Dome, was their first encounter in nearly two and a half years.

"I know that move! Don't tell me you were training at the Liangshan, too?!"

"That's my line, you giant clod! No wonder you've gotten so

strong!”

Lester swung the Bardiche-Leo with enormous speed, while Irene leaped forward as it scraped past, too close for him to land a direct hit.

“That goes for you, too! Erenshkigal might have snatched your Orga Lux, but you’re a hell of a lot stronger than last time!”

Irene stabbed forward with her hand with unbelievable speed, but that alone wouldn’t be enough to stop him.

As she closed what little distance remained between them, Lester moved to strike her outstretched hand with his elbow, but she ended up delivering a biting strike into his upper arm.

“Idiot! Did you think I’d forgotten that? You ain’t fooling me twice with that one!”

“Yeah? This is the perfect chance to repay you for last time! Take this!”

Ignoring the pain, Lester shifted his grip to take hold of the Bardiche-Leo single-handedly, using his free hand to unleash a powerful punch.

“Guh…!”

Irene managed to catch the blow with both hands, but the force behind it was enough to send her flying backward across the stage.

The next moment, Lester readjusted his grip on his weapon and pounced upon her from above, aiming for a decisive overhead strike.

“Not so fast!”

Irene, however, twisted her body through the air, dodging the blow by a fraction of an inch. Then, landing with her right foot atop the Bardiche-Leo, which was now wedged into the ground, she used her left foot to deal a powerful turning kick.

*“Tch!”*

Lester guarded against it with his left arm, but the strike was so powerful that it practically echoed through his whole body. To think that she could deliver such a formidable strike from such a disadvantageous position…

“Impressive, Irene Urzaiz…!”

“Heh, you’re no slouch either! You sure couldn’t have pulled that off last time…!”

With that exchange, they each drew back to catch their breath.

And then—

“Raaaaaaaaaaarrrgh!”

“Hraaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Once more they leaped toward each other, both unleashing terrible war cries.

This time, however, Lester attacked from directly in front, while it was Irene who tried to circle around to his side.

*Damn it, she’s fast!*

Before he could reach her, Irene jumped—and then, curling her body into a ball as she dived through the air, she spun around and delivered a shocking ax kick.

“Gah…!”

Lester shielded himself with his arm and reached out to grab her leg, but Irene was one step ahead, using that outstretched arm as a foothold and launching into a somersault over his head. Then, upside-down and in midair, she unleashed a powerful spear-hand strike into the back of his head.

He managed to dodge the blow by feinting forward, while at the same time twisting around and swinging the Bardiche-Leo.

His reach, however, fell but a fraction too short.

*“Ngh…!”*

*“Tch…!”*

Irene, having landed safely on the ground, and Lester, raising his ax before him and restoring his fighting posture, fixed each other with baleful glares.

They were, for all intents and purposes, evenly matched. Lester had the advantage as far as the destructive power of each strike was concerned, but Irene came first when it came to speed and the rate of her attacks.

The sheer power of Lester’s Bardiche-Leo was such that he would normally have little difficulty pushing his opponent onto the back foot. Irene, perhaps cautious of that battle-ax, or perhaps wary given the difference in the reach of their respective attacks, was being unusually careful about pursuing him.

However, with the way she was focusing her prana into her fists, her own attack power couldn’t be underestimated. Even if he dedicated some of his prana to defense, if those spear-hand strikes were to make contact, they would tear through him like paper. Indeed, he doubted that focusing any amount of prana would be effective at stopping those cutting blows. He had researched similar fighter’s prior to the match and found an old martial artist from Jie Long with a similar attack style, but unfortunately, that hadn’t

helped him develop a counterstrategy.

To add to his difficulties, Irene had evidently tempered her skills to an extreme. There was no way any average fighter would have been able to pull off that midair movement that she had managed a few moments earlier.

"…Just out of curiosity," he began, "what was your final ranking at the Liangshan?"

"*Otsubu.* You?"

*"Koubu."*

"*Tch!* So you're higher than me?!" Irene broke into a frustrated frown.

Xinglou's ranking system at the Liangshan was divided into four levels: *koubu*, *otusbu*, *heibu*, and *teibu*, in that order. In other words, Lester ranked among the strongest fighters gathered there. However, it was practically impossible to gauge much more about the system than that. To begin with, Xinglou had never revealed what factors contributed to it, nor had she ever told them how many students she was teaching.

*Well then…what next?*

Since he had begun training at the Liangshan, Lester's level of skill and technique had surpassed his wildest expectations. As one of the highest-ranked fighters there, he was confident he could defeat most opponents—but to his chagrin, he was having a hard time getting a handle on Irene's movements.

However, for her part, Irene wouldn't be able to deliver a decisive blow without coming into his range, either.

In that case…

"All right, you giant clod. I've got a proposal for you," Irene called out. "Stretching this out is getting boring. Why don't we decide this now? Let's both put everything we've got into one final attack!" And with that, she raised her index finger into the air, fixing him with an indomitable grin.

"…All or nothing, huh?"

"That'll be more interesting than us wearing each other down like this, don't you think?"

"…All right. Sounds good! I'll bite!"

He had to admit, that kind of battle better suited his own tastes, too.

"Heh-heh! Now you're talking!" Irene laughed, putting one leg forward and preparing to charge.

In response, Lester tightened the grip of his right hand on the Bardiche-Leo, holding it out horizontally, so no matter which direction his opponent lunged from, he would be ready to counter.

"All right… Now!"

And with that, Irene seemed to completely disappear.

*"Tch!"*

Of course, she hadn't simply vanished. Her explosive speed was such that he hadn't been able to catch her movements.

*Just like that brat from Jie Long…!*

It was a technique for ultra-high-speed movement, produced by focusing one's prana into one's legs. While rare, given that it was common enough for martial artists to focus their prana into their fists, there was nothing particularly strange about it.

He swung the Bardiche-Leo to his right, but he was too slow. There was no way he could have made it in time.

And yet—

*"Guh?!"*

—Irene's spear-hand strike came to a sudden stop mere inches short of his school crest.

"Y-you…!" Coughing up blood, she fixed him with a baleful glare.

"Sorry, but you weren't the only one keeping your best move for last."

Irene lowered her gaze, only now seeing that, in his left hand, Lester was gripping a second Bardiche-Leo, its pommel embedded deep into her abdomen.

It was a mixed defensive–offensive technique, made possible only by wielding two weapons simultaneously. This was the new battle style he had mastered during his time at the Liangshan.

"*Feh…!* You… You got me…!" Irene breathed out, before falling unconscious to the ground.

Catching her in his arms, Lester murmured, "Consider the score settled, Irene Urzaiz."

*"End of battle! Winner: Lester MacPhail!"*

And with that, the automated voice rang out, announcing that he had made it into the final sixteen.

*

"*Ngh…!* Here!"

Saya unleashed a simultaneous barrage from every last barrel of her type 41 Lux homing blaster, the Waldenholt Mark II.

Six arcing lines coursed through the air, descending upon her opponent, Curtis Wright, Allekant's Ningirsu, the Double-Headed Eagle, when—

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Keep going!" Curtis dodged all six blasts, as if dancing through the air.

She had been able to track her opponent adequately enough and had used the Waldenholt Mark II, the most accurate Lux in her arsenal, to fire six synchronized charges, and still it wasn't enough.

Slipping through that torrent of light, he charged toward her with impossible speed. At his feet were two great spears—or more precisely, two spear-shaped glowing blades of a Rect Lux.

In other words, he was using that Rect Lux to fly through the air.

"*Ugh…!* You Allekant people and your annoying contraptions…!" Saya spat out, falling back in an attempt to stop him from reaching the vernier of her back unit.

She wasn't quick enough, however. Curtis grazed past, gouging the section that covered her arm. His incredible speed was too much. Saya had diverted what power she could afford from the vernier to its recoil-control mechanisms and specifically tuned it for high-speed aerial maneuvers, but it still wasn't enough against her opponent's Rect Lux.

"Annoying contraptions…? I could say the same thing about yours, Miss Sasamiya! I've never seen anything at Allekant like the Luxes you use!" Curtis, hovering in the air, laughed as he crossed his arms.

He was a first-year student at Allekant Académie's high school, assigned to the practical class, with unruly chestnut-colored hair and a youthful, almost childish face.

His combat skill, however, was far beyond the norm.

He may have merely been using a normal Rect Lux, but his degree of control over it defied all reason, and Saya's attacks were left unable to reach their target.

"Type 35 Lux Gatling cannon, Granvaleria," she murmured, returning the Waldenholt to its holder at her waist and activating a gargantuan log-sized auto-cannon.

"Whoa! That looks like it's packing even more than the last

one!” Curtis exclaimed, falling back across the stage.

As far as raw speed was concerned, Hufeng Zhao from Jie Long easily had her present opponent beat.

And as far as mobility went, Rimcy, with her flight unit, was undeniably his superior.

The real reason Saya couldn’t land a hit against Curtis was his sheer unpredictability—she couldn’t predict what he would do next at any given moment. The Rect Lux terminals at his feet effectively functioned as vernier thrusters, allowing him to rapidly accelerate and change direction in midair. But even more troubling, their user’s actions were simply so chaotic that she was left unable to read them at all.

*I’ll just have to resort to numerical superiority, then…!*

Bracing her own Lux under her arm, she aimed directly toward him and fired.

The Granvaleria could fire four thousand rounds per minute. The barrage it let forth was practically a hurricane.

“Yahoo!”

Even so, not a single one of them reached their target. Curtis more or less surfed right over her barrage in a wide arc as she chased after him.

“Grrrrrr…!” Saya ground her teeth in frustration.

Her opponent’s only means of attack was by scoring a direct hit with his Rect Lux. He didn’t appear to be carrying any other weapons. As far as Saya was concerned, that was more stupidity than bravery.

That being the case, it would have been logical to attempt to lure him into an ambush as he made his attack—but to Saya’s great frustration, that, too, had proved ineffective. He would sway from side to side like a wild current, at times climbing dangerously high into the air, and at others, plummeting toward the ground. No sooner would he appear to be leaping upward than he would wrap around behind her and come flying down from overhead.

But in spite of his limited options for attack, he continued to vary the formula so much that Saya was left completely astonished. Indeed, her opponent had to be some kind of natural genius to be able to make such efficient use of his limitations.

Which meant, she suspected, that his talent had been forged by the Ban’yuu Tenra.

“Come on! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

This time, he spun in circles through the air on his Rect Lux as he dodged the Granvaleria's continued bombardment.

"You'll need something better than that peashooter to take down this Rect Lux of mine! Don't underestimate the Shalurgus!"

"You're a talker…!" Saya murmured under her breath.

It was true that each individual bullet fired from the Granvaleria wasn't particularly powerful—the idea was to use it to deliver an overwhelming barrage—or else as suppression fire. Short of installing multiple pieces of manadite using the LOBOS transition method, if she was to attempt to increase the power output any further than she had, the Lux's core would inevitably collapse.

For Saya, who had always emphasized big guns and enormous firepower, Curtis's words were nothing short of humiliating.

"Speed, freedom, and strength! That's my motto!" Curtis exclaimed as he jolted back and forth through the air, the terminals of his Rect Lux leaving blinding arcs of light in his path.

*He's still getting faster…?!*

She mixed straight-flying bullets with arcing ones, but still none managed to reach him.

And then—

"Got you!"

"—!"

Saya leaped forward to dodge Curtis's next attack as he swung around behind her and swooped down from above. She managed to escape injury, but he came close enough to tear through a few strands of hair, sending them falling softly to the ground.

"Hu-uh? That's weird, I thought I had you that time… Ah, I see! Miss Sasamiya, you're so small I must have misjudged my aim!"

"How dare you?! That's unforgivable!"

Once more, Saya let forth a wide sweep with the Granvaleria, but as she had feared, it still wasn't good enough to score a hit.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! You know, I thought pretty highly of you after watching your battle with Rimcy, but I guess that puppet mustn't have been everything people say it is!" Curtis laughed mirthfully as he skipped through the air, his tone of voice, despite his words, seemingly devoid of malice. "Well, not that I thought I'd have any trouble beating Rimcy myself, though!"

"…Oh?"

With that, Saya stopped firing and hung her head.

"Now then, maybe it's time to finish this!" No sooner did Curtis

finish speaking than the twin blades of his divided Rect Lux began to swell.

He was using Meteor Arts to increase their size. No doubt any attempt at defense would prove ineffective.

"All right, then, I'm coming for you!"

He increased his speed yet further, arcing through the air in ever-shrinking circles like a giant drill. A powerful vortex of wind sent Saya's hair streaking in every possible direction.

*"Imdolgud!"*

"…You're going to regret this, brat." Completely composed, Saya activated one of her new Luxes. "Type 42 Lux pile blaster: Aresbringer."

As she spoke, a long, cylindrical Lux emerged to encompass her entire right arm.

This was one of her newly developed Luxes, the ultimate personalized weapon, designed specifically both to release tremendous power *at close range* and to make maximum use of her own specific fighting techniques.

She had succeeded in tricking Curtis into swooping downward on his Rect Lux, waiting until he was almost close enough to pierce her through, before deftly stepping aside and smashing the Aresbringer into him with all her strength.

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, Sasamiya Swordgun Technique—*Four-Hornet Detonation!*"

"Wha—?!"

As the blast was released, an ultrapowerful, ultrashort-range burst of energy engulfed the blades of Curtis's Rect Lux, sending him plummeting defenseless to the ground.

Its manadite core destroyed, Curtis's Rect Lux exploded in a brilliant conflagration, scattering across the stage in minuscule fragments.

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-wha…? Th-that was intense…!" Having been thrown across the stage by the explosion, Curtis, sitting slumped on the ground, rubbed his hand against his back, his eyes teary. "I-in retrospect, I think there's something I should tell you…"

"Oh…?"

As Saya lowered the Aresbringer in front of his eyes, Curtis flashed her an awkward smile, raising his empty hands into the air:

"I— I'm sorry…"

*

“Thank you, Mr. Amagiri! I’m looking forward to today!” The girl bowed her head to him so deeply that it almost looked like her long bangs might reach the floor. She looked somewhat older than when Ayato had last seen her, more mature.

“Don’t be too hard on me, Minato…,” he replied, holding out his hand. “It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

“Y-yes! You look well!” she answered, nervously gripping his hand in her own.

The strength in that grip was enough for him to be able to tell just how much effort and training she had been accumulating since they had last met.

Technically, they had only ever met once, when she and her teammates had come to pay their respects after the end of the Gryps. Minato had been part of Queenvale’s Team Kaguya in the group tournament—and as it happened, one of her teammates, Yuzuhi Renjouji, was an old acquaintance of his and a student of the Amagiri Shinmei style.

Team Kaguya had made it all the way to the semifinals, but due to the significant damage that each of their members had received at the hands of Le Wolfe’s mercenary team in their quarterfinals match, they had ultimately been unable to compete. Even now, however, Ayato could still picture just how wonderfully they had fought alongside each other. The fact that they had reached the point they had and would have gone up against Gallardworth’s Team Lancelot—putting aside whether they would have won that match—was proof in and of itself of how skilled they each were.

*“And now, having entered the stage, Contestant Amagiri and Contestant Wakamiya are shaking hands! This kind of sportsmanship is a nice change of pace considering the level of some of our previous matches, wouldn’t you say, Zaharoula?”*

*“Well, it doesn’t really bother me, so long as we get a good match… But still, to be perfectly honest with you, Kennin Fubatsu was unbelievably powerful at last year’s Gryps. As far as close-combat performance goes, she has to be among my top five this time around. So I’d either put her on par with the Murakumo in that regard, or else maybe even…”*

At these unexpected words of praise from the commentator, Minato found herself shaking her head.

“No, no, no! I’m nowhere near your level, Mr. Amagiri!”

“Ha-ha, there’s no need to be modest. Anyone who’s seen your previous matches must know that Zaharoula isn’t exaggerating there.”

Ayato himself had been deeply impressed by her performance in the preliminaries. She may have had a difficult time in the second round, having fought against an opponent who specialized in long-range combat—which showed that her fighting style wasn’t perfect—but in her other matches, she had nonetheless been able to demonstrate her overwhelming close-combat prowess. He himself had a good command over the Amagiri Shinmei style’s grappling techniques, but he had no idea what the outcome would be if he attempted to face off against her directly.

“Besides,” Ayato began—when Zaharoula’s voice suddenly echoed across the stage:

*“Besides, Kennin Fubatsu has never used an Orga Lux before. That could really tip the scales.”*

*“Right, according to my data here, Contestant Wakamiya is currently in possession of Queenvale’s Járngreipr, the Gauntlets of Layered Steel, but she didn’t end up using it in the preliminaries!”*

*“The cost of using them makes it difficult to put them to use in a tournament setting. And I don’t really know if they’ll be able to stand up to the Murakumo’s Ser Veresta, either…”*

“…That’s close enough to what I was going to say,” Ayato said, flashing her an apologetic smile.

Minato smiled back at him, removing the activation body from the holder at her waist. “Of course, I’m planning to use them this time!”

As she activated the Orga Lux, a pair of gigantic silver-colored gauntlets materialized around her fists.

“So that’s the Járngreipr…”

“Its abilities aren’t the most powerful…but it suits my battle style,” Minato said, pressing the twin gauntlets together.

The Járngreipr was capable of adjusting its own weight. In certain respects, it was similar to the Gravisheath’s ability to manipulate gravity—but in this case, it was only the Orga Lux’s own weight that was being controlled, not its user’s or target’s.

The cost of using it was *sleep*. It was said that the more it was used, the more its user needed a long period of rest to recover. Compared to the Gravisheath’s desire for blood, that was a fairly

lenient cost—but seeing as the Járngreipr could easily demand more than twenty-four hours of sleep at a time, its use in a tournament like the Festa introduced the possibility that its user would be unable to make their next match. On top of that, the slumber it put its user into was no ordinary sleep—there was simply no way of waking them until its required cost had been satisfied.

Part of Minato's reason for not having used the Járngreipr thus far may have been to conceal her potential from future opponents, but she was no doubt even more concerned about the cost it would demand of her.

"Well, the cost *is* a bit of a nuisance… But I can't afford to worry about tomorrow against an opponent as skilled as you, Mr. Amagiri!" Minato declared.

"In that case, I had better prepare myself, too," Ayato replied, activating the Ser Veresta.

As he did, the crowd amassed in the gallery erupted with cheers, their enthusiasm jolting up several notches.

*"Now that both our contestants have activated their Orga Luxes, it's time to get this show underway! The winner of this fourth round will make their way into the top sixteen!"*

Ayato and Minato bowed to each other and fell back to their respective starting positions. Minato held her right fist ready in front of her, while Ayato held the Ser Veresta up at eye level.

*"Lindvolus Round 4, Match 1—begin!"*

No sooner did the automated voice ring out than Minato rushed directly toward him. Ayato raised his sword to counter, but Minato immediately leaped to his side, twisting her body around as she launched into a powerful backhand punch.

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Ayato pulled the Ser Veresta back to catch the blow, when—

"Wha—?!"

—the tremendous shock sent him flying backward more than ten meters.

*How can it be this powerful…?!*

The shock was of a level he had never before experienced, like being hit with all the force of a craggy mountain. There was absolutely no way he would have been able to brace himself against the attack. Compared to this, the Lux Eater he had faced in the first

round was practically a children's toy.

He couldn't tell just how much the weight of those gauntlets had been increased by, but it was clear enough that the weight directly corresponded with their destructive potential. No matter which angle he tried to view the Járngreipr from, his opponent's Orga Lux was much more threatening than he had ever imagined.

"Not yet…!" Minato rushed toward him, launching into her pursuit.

As she dived toward him with her right hand, Ayato fell back to avoid, if only barely, her oncoming fist.

And with that, Minato lost her balance, tumbling forward. She had likely only increased the weight of her gauntlets the moment she planned to make contact, but given that she was swinging something so incredibly heavy, Ayato had suspected that, should she miss her target, the weight of those gauntlets would be enough to take her whole body with them. No matter how physically robust a Genestella might be, if that Orga Lux wasn't handled properly, it would probably end up tearing off its user's arms.

Ayato rushed to take advantage of the momentary opening, but he realized immediately that this thought had been too optimistic.

Minato used the momentum of her missed attack to spin through the air, launching into a second strike with her left hand. Her speed was so incredibly fast that her fist ended up grazing against the tip of his nose as he fell back.

*"Hrgh…!"*

Still letting her momentum carry her, Minato whirled around like a spinning top, all without leaving so much as a single opening that Ayato might be able to take advantage of.

*I see… So this is what she meant when she said it suited her battle style…*

Minato's Genkuu style of fighting was a specialized school of hand-to-hand combat that emphasized rotating one's body and moving in arcs and circles. Its practitioners had finely honed senses of balance—and so there could be no more appropriate weapon for such fighters than one that combined that momentum with the destructive power of such a crushing weight.

Ayato couldn't help but watch on in admiration.

He understood full well that it would be to his disadvantage to attempt to remain on the defensive. He could try using his Tsugomori technique to counter her attacks, but having already

used it once in the tournament, he didn't want to show it off any more than he already had. In any event, with the way that Minato's posture essentially kept her school crest shielded by her left hand, even using the Tsugomori to try to wrench his way past her Orga Lux would prove difficult.

In that case, his best option was to remain on the offensive.

*"Haah!"*

He brought the Ser Veresta down in a diagonal slash, forcing his opponent to catch it with her gauntlets and push it aside.

As she did so, Ayato flicked his wrists back and brought his blade toward her torso, aiming to unleash a rapid thrust—but to his surprise, Minato kept catching first one attempt, then the next. She wasn't exactly blocking his attacks so much as she was turning them back against him.

Nonetheless, he couldn't afford to let up with his assault.

While it wasn't quite at the level of Kirin's New Conjoined Cranes technique, he put everything he had into thrusting at, sweeping toward, and cutting down every last possible opening that revealed itself.

*"Wow! Contestant Amagiri has launched into an incredibly fierce chain of attacks! But look how superbly Contestant Wakamiya is managing to hold her ground!"*

"Ugh…!" Frustration, or perhaps pain, flashed across Minato's face, but still she continued to block his every move.

Frankly speaking, Ayato should easily have had her beat as far as raw physical strength and stamina were concerned. So long as they were both fighting with their preferred weapons—he with a sword and she with her fists—he *should* have been the more proficient of the two.

How, then, was she managing to hold him off like this?

The only possible explanation was that she was used to being on the receiving end of even more powerful attacks. And not just once or twice—continuously.

"The Ban'yuu Tenra has trained you well…!" Ayato muttered without slowing the pace of his assault.

Minato's eyes opened wide in surprise for a brief moment, before she answered with more than a hint of embarrassment: "Y-you know about that?"

The only way Ayato could believe that anyone could show such dramatic growth over only one year was if they had received

training at the hands of Jie Long's student council president.

However, it was unlikely that Xinglou Fan would be willing to train students from the other schools without some kind of precondition. She was no doubt demanding something from her students in return.

"You must have a wish you need granting if you're willing to go that far…!"

Ayato rushed forward, bringing his sword down upon his opponent from above.

Minato, however, caught the blow with her fists and then kicked him in a counterattack.

"Of course!" she replied. "I've got a dream that I need to make come true!"

Ayato spun backward to avoid the tips of her shoes.

At first, he had been taken aback by her considerable level of power, but the nature of her attacks, all requiring a buildup of momentum as she drew long arcs through the air, was in and of itself a considerable limitation. If he was to approach the battle calmly, it wouldn't be impossible for him to avoid her strikes even at close range—but of course, he wouldn't be able to let down his guard.

*A dream, huh…?*

The dazzling glint in Minato's eyes suggested that she truly was fighting for something.

While Ayato knew many students at Asterisk who fought to have a wish granted, he knew of no others who fought for such a pure reason as a dream. For Julis and Kirin, and for himself, too, what they fought for wasn't a dream so much as a means toward accomplishing a goal. As similar as they were, there was unmistakably something different between needing to achieve something, needing to prevent something from happening, and wanting to make a dream come true.

Perhaps that was why there was something refreshing, something that left him feeling unexpectedly warm inside, about this close contest of offense and defense.

"If you don't mind, won't you tell me about this dream of yours?"

Ayato rushed to strike his opponent with his right elbow, before bending down and trying to trip her with his leg—but Minato

quickly swung around, leaping backward to put some distance between them.

"Oh? Are you interested?" She broke into a joyful smile as she corrected her fighting stance. "My dream…is to go to the moon!"

"Huh?!"

Minato lashed out with a straight, direct lunge. Unlike her previous, arcing attacks, this was much more similar to the kinds of moves employed by Jie Long's martial artists.

She leaped across the ground, each step leaving the earth shaking as she ran, bearing down on him with a decisive strike.

"The moon…? What a…nice…dream!"

"—!"

Ayato couldn't help but be impressed as he repelled each of her consecutive punches. There was something pure and honest about her ambition, something that made it seem like the most fitting wish imaginable for a tournament like the Festa.

"Thank you! It was originally my dad's dream, but now I've made it my own!"

"Oh…?"

Ayato countered with the Twin Serpents, but Minato crossed her arms, catching his blade with the Járngreipr.

At that moment, Ayato realized something that made him stop in his tracks.

*Huh…? The moon…?*

In the present era, there remained precious few organizations willing to invest in large-scale space exploration. But there was one that he remembered hearing about not long ago…

"Don't let down your guard!"

"Oops…!"

He had allowed himself to get distracted, delaying his response. Unable to dodge Minato's oncoming punch, he focused his prana into the side of his body as a jolt of piercing pain ran through him. The blow was powerful enough that it had probably ended up cracking at least one of his ribs.

"Ha-ha… Maybe I should focus on the matter at hand…," he said, falling back.

A flash of pain swept across his face, but he quickly worked to get his breathing under control, correcting his stance with the Ser Veresta.

"In that case…maybe we should finish this?"

Minato's expression turned grave as she lunged forward, sticking close to the ground. By the looks of it, she was preparing to deal the decisive blow.

There was little doubting that Ayato would have the advantage in a prolonged contest. He could always choose to maintain the current exchange of blows, waiting for her to make a mistake—as he himself just had.

Prior to the match, he had looked over all available data on his opponent and found that she had two major weaknesses. The first was her lesser ability to deal with long-range attacks, while the second was her relative paucity of prana. Indeed, she had ended up exhausting her prana midbattle during the Gryps the previous year. And seeing as one's amount of prana was part of one's physical constitution, and remained fixed from birth, not even her training by the Ban'yuu Tenra should have affected it.

If they kept fighting the way they were, she would end up exhausting her prana whether she wanted to or not. Her use of the Járngreipr certainly wouldn't help in that regard. It was definitely better than fighting empty-handed like one of Jie Long's martial artists, which required considerable prana to begin with, or combining that kind of fighting style with a regular knuckle-type Lux, which would have required the use of Meteor Arts to face the kinds of fighters who had entered the Lindvolus. Compared to that, an Orga Lux that didn't require the immediate consumption of a huge amount of prana was clearly the most appropriate means of increasing her fighting potential—but she was still only delaying the inevitable.

In any case, waiting for her to exhaust her prana was clearly a logical strategy.

Logical, yes, and yet—

"I want to fight you with respect. Not everyone enters this tournament in pursuit of such a pure dream."

Ayato honed his prana, matching Minato's fighting spirit as he prepared to launch his next attack.

Of course, he couldn't afford to lose this match, either. He knew also that this wasn't the best choice to make right now if he wanted to be sure of winning.

However, if he was to focus on nothing but immediate victory, he would essentially be mistaking the insignificant for the essential. If the match was prolonged, he would end up exhausting his own

prana, too, and could end up revealing his hand before he was ready. Taking into account that he meant to make it to the next match, and the one after that, all the way to the end, it was hardly the best option available.

That being the case, his present actions carried some risk, but a quick, decisive finale suited his needs, too.

"Here I go!" Minato cried, leaping in front of him. "Raaaaaaaaaah!"

*She's fast… But I can still…!*

Ayato shifted to the side, letting her open-hand punch slip past him. Then, with her school crest left exposed, he raised his blade over his head and—

"Now!"

"—?!"

Minato, perhaps having guessed his moves, quickly withdrew her arm.

No, even if she had read his actions, she wouldn't have had time to correct herself as quickly as she had.

And for her to be able to do that, the Járngreipr would have to be incredibly light—

*Did she eliminate its weight entirely…?!*

Given that she had the power to freely control the Orga Lux's mass, it should have been more than possible for her to increase it only at the moment of impact—at all other times, it only made sense to keep those gauntlets as light as possible. However…what if she were used to wielding them in a somewhat heavier state? Then, at the critical moment, she could let that weight abate and take her opponent unawares…

*"Oh, what's this?! Contestant Wakamiya has caught the Ser Veresta in midair!"*

When Ayato realized his mistake, Minato was already raising her arms into the air, catching his blade between her hands.

An incredible force wrapped around the Orga Lux, wrenching it from his hands. She must have increased its weight for a brief moment, just enough to disarm him. Minato herself had crouched down to the ground so as to keep her arms from being torn off, a crater forming beneath her.

"Ugh…!"

Ayato moved at once to retrieve the Ser Veresta, but before he could reach it, Minato threw it over her shoulder high into the air.

“Oops…!”

He had no idea whether he would be able to defeat her if he challenged her empty-handed.

At the very least, he needed to put some distance between them both, and then he could—

“I’ve got you now!”

All of a sudden, Minato leaped upward, thrusting her right fist toward him with all her strength.

*If it’s come to this…*

Wasting no time making a decision, Ayato concentrated his prana into one leg and, just before Minato’s Járngreipr-clad fist could reach him, jumped high into the air.

“Huh?!”

Of course, if he had miscalculated his timing by even a fraction, he could have been sent flying in any direction or even ended up flipping over—or worse, if he had seriously misjudged it, he may have even ended up crushing his own bones.

However, halfway into her current attack, Minato’s options for countering were extremely limited. That being the case, reading them wasn’t all too difficult.

*“Guh…!”*

Seemingly thrown up into the air from his opponent’s punch, Ayato, his face writhing in pain, reached out and plucked the Ser Veresta from midair. He almost reached the ceiling of the protective gel that encased the stage before beginning to fall back down.

“Impressive, Mr. Amagiri! But I still have the advantage!”

Of course, Minato was waiting for him.

It would have been different if he’d had abilities that would let him fly through the air like Julis could—or an Orga Lux like Hufeng Zhao’s Tongtianzu—but in his current state, it was impossible for him to freely control his descent. At this rate, he would practically fall directly into Minato’s next attack.

In that case, he would simply have to finish the match before then.

“Hauuuuuuuuuuuh!”

With all his strength, he poured every last ounce of his prana into the urm-manadite core of the Ser Veresta.

“—! Meteor Arts…!”

Having triggered a mana excitation overload, the Orga Lux’s blade swelled to a gigantic size as Ayato let out a terrible roar.

Minato, perhaps having realized that she wouldn't be able to avoid the oncoming strike, raised and crossed her hands over her head in an attempt to catch it.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaugh!"

"Yaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The urm-manadite cores of both the Ser Veresta and the Járngreipr glowed brilliantly, a dark pattern flowing across the gleaming blade as it collided with those silver knuckles in a dazzling burst of light.

Both Orga Luxes strained against each other, until—

"Ugh… Ahhhhh!"

Unable to bear the brunt of the attack any longer, Minato's arms were brushed aside.

And with that, the tip of the Ser Veresta fell downward, slicing clean through Minato's school crest as she fell backward.

*"Minato Wakamiya—crest broken."*
*"End of battle! Winner: Ayato Amagiri!"*

No sooner did Ayato land safely on the ground than the automated voice echoed across the stage.

"Phew…"

He wiped the sweat from his forehead before approaching his fallen opponent.

"Are you all right, Minato?"

"Ah-ha-ha… I guess I'm still not good enough…" But despite her words, her expression seemed to be one of relief.

"Not at all. If I had made even a single mistake, you would have had me."

Ayato undeniably had greater overall strength, but if he was being honest with himself, he had only barely managed to pull through. In terms of strategy and techniques, Minato, it seemed, had made some very successful preparations.

"Yep, you really are strong," he continued, holding out his hand to her just as he had at the beginning of the match.

"…Thank you, Mr. Amagiri," she replied shyly as he helped her to her feet.

A wave of cheers and applause rained down upon them from the galleries.

# EPILOGUE

From the air-window illuminating the darkness, Mico Yanase and Zaharoula's discussion of the tournament rang out.

*"Well, well, well, Round Four was just one hard-fought battle after another, don't you think? Now that we're finally down to the top sixteen…why don't we review each of the contestants, Zaharoula? Let's start with the first match of Round Five. To kick things off, we've got Seidoukan Academy's number one, Ayato Amagiri, the Murakumo, who, as I'm sure our viewers all know, was part of the winning teams of both the Phoenix and the Gryps this season and is hoping to become the first contestant since the second Ban'yuu Tenra to pull off a grand slam!"*

"*If you were to take the overwhelming favorite, Orphelia Landlufen, out of the picture, I'd say he's at the top of the three most promising contenders*," she agreed. *"He's got a high level of physical ability and a wide knowledge of a variety of martial arts. Not to mention his incredible amount of prana—and that Orga Lux of his, the Ser Veresta, with its ability to cut through just about anything. It looks like he wasn't very good at controlling his prana up until recently, but now that he can optimize the Ser Veresta to suit his own battle style, I'd say that his most glaring weakness has been taken care of."*

*"I see, I see. How about his next opponent, then? Rodolfo Zoppo? Basadone is Le Wolfe's second-highest-ranked fighter, right? People have been saying that he's the real thing for years now, but this is his first time ever entering the Festa. He sure made an exciting display of carving through his opponents in the preliminaries!"*

*"That ability of his to manipulate other people's prana is extraordinary. I mean, it doesn't matter who you are—once you're within his range, he'll be able to KO you just like that. If I had to say that he's got a weakness…that ability would be completely useless against an opponent who doesn't have any prana to begin with—like,*

*say, those autonomous puppets that Allekant's entrants are using as substitute fighters. Luckily for Rodolfo, both puppets that have made it into the main tournament aren't in his block, so he won't have to face them until the final, if then. Although, even without his Dante abilities, he's still a formidable martial artist, so I'm sure all his potential opponents are busy working out counterstrategies."*

"*Moving on to the second match, let's take a look at Jie Long Seventh Institute's Fuyuka Umenokouji*," Yanase went on. *"This is also the Witch of Dharani's first time out on the public stage. I've heard her called Jie Long's hidden treasure… But didn't you think that ability of hers was a bit strange, what with her summoning up those weird creatures during the preliminaries?"*

*"Something tells me we haven't seen everything she's capable of yet, so I can't really say anything about this one. Her skills look a bit like a unique arrangement of* seisenjutsu*, but still…it looks like she's capable of fighting for herself, too. She's an interesting one, that's for sure. And given that she ranks even higher than Raigeki Senka at Jie Long, which, as you know, values strength above everything else, I'm sure that ability of hers isn't just for show."*

*"Facing off against Contestant Umenokouji is Saint Gallardworth Academy's seventh-ranked fighter, Noelle Messmer. Perceforêt has made a pretty unusual move for one of Gallardworth's Page Ones in entering the Lindvolus. At Gallardworth, they normally expect their top-ten fighters to team up in the Gryps while ignoring the other tournaments, right? In fact, Contestant Messmer was part of Team Tristan in last year's Gryps, wasn't she?"*

"*There's been more than a few contestants who have shown unexpected growth over a short period of time and made it into the main tournament this year*," Zaharoula offered. *"Noelle Messmer is certainly one of them. She's shown dramatic improvements in close-combat—especially so considering that it used to be her main weak point—but on top of that, it's hard to miss just how much her area abilities have improved, too. She might not be as famous as well-known names like Sigrdrífa or the Glühen Rose, but as a Strega, she ranks among the best."*

*"Hmm, hmm, I see. And next up…in the third match, we have Seidoukan Academy's eleventh-ranked fighter, Lester MacPhail. Kornephoros's tremendous attack power managed to tear right through his opponents' defenses in the preliminaries. Among the top sixteen, he's one of only three contestants who aren't relying on abilities or Orga Luxes. He's the kind of fighter who likes to decide things in a single bout,*

*whether it's an official ranking match or here at the Festa."*

*"Lester MacPhail is another one of those fighters who has shown an incredible amount of growth over a short period of time. Practically everything about him has leveled up, from his battle style designed to keep his opponent on the back foot through sheer brute force to his unique offensive skills and overpowering way of fighting. Well, he was always good at adapting to changing circumstances, but still. Speaking for myself, his fourth-round match against Irene Urzaiz was something to behold."*

*"It's probably fair to say that Contestant MacPhail's opponent is this year's dark horse entrant, Saint Gallardworth Academy's Black Knight. His match versus Roswitha Dietze was… How do I say this…? A bit scary, to be perfectly honest with you."* Yanase chuckled nervously. *"He was heavily reprimanded and lost half his points as a penalty, and yet…"*

*"Gallardworth's student council president described him as a Dante with multiple different personalities. I'd never seen a case like that before, either… What did he call his ability? Invincibility? Maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration, but his strength definitely does go beyond the norm. I'm looking forward to seeing how the other entrants are planning to deal with him."*

*"And next, in the fourth and last round from the West Block, we have Seidoukan Academy's number five, Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld. The Glühen Rose is a top-class Strega also aiming to win a grand slam this time around—and a bona fide princess to boot. Every time I watch her fight, she's more and more amazing!"*

*"She's increased all her skills to a high level. With her range of abilities suited for medium- and long-range combat, and with her Rect Lux supporting her in close combat, she's got a huge advantage as a jack-of-all-trades. On top of that, she's clearly got an aptitude for strategizing—and a fine control over her prana, too. I'd definitely list her among my top picks."*

"*Her opponent is Jie Long Seventh Institute's number two, Xiaohui Wu*," Yanase continued. *"These two last fought each other in their semifinals match during the Gryps, but we didn't really get to see them face off against each other directly back then. I'm looking forward to what they've got in store for us this time! Rumor has it that after his loss at the Gryps, the Celestial Warrior has taken a leave of absence to travel around the world to improve his abilities… That's probably why he was able to end every last one of his matches during the preliminaries in a*

*single blow."*

*"Xiaohui Wu is the first disciple of the third-generation Ban'yuu Tenra, and he's head and shoulders above her other students in terms of combat techniques. After Erenshkigal, he's my second-top pick for the winner this time around. Whether it comes to hand-to-hand combat, weapons, or* seisenjutsu *at close or medium ranges, he's at the head of the crowd. The fact that Ayato Amagiri and Kirin Toudou had to team up during the Gryps to defeat him is pretty telling, I'd say. On top of that, it looks like he's developed some new techniques to show off this time as well."*

*"Moving on—kicking off the East Block, in the fifth match, we've got Seidoukan Academy's Saya Sasamiya. Seidoukan has had four students make it all the way to the top sixteen, their largest number ever for this stage of the tournament. They've really made great strides since last season, enough to make it hard to believe that they had been in the middle of a bit of a slump only a few years ago. Pretty surprising, considering that Le Wolfe had the most entrants make it through to the top thirty-two—but they've been reduced to just two fighters now that we're entering Round Five."*

"*Well, considering that those two surviving entrants are their first- and second-ranked fighters, I'd say that their chances are still pretty good*," Zaharoula cautioned. *"But as far as Saya Sasamiya goes, we've all seen her ultra-high-powered Luxes on show in both the Phoenix and the Gryps. As far as I'm concerned, they're practically on par with Orga Luxes. She's been doing well so far, and you can be sure she's packing massive firepower when it comes to long-range combat. I'm not a gambling woman, but if I was going to bet on someone, it'd probably be her. The favorites are pretty boring by this point, and if you're hoping to get a huge return on your wager, the chances of making a killing on her are by no means slim."*

*"Oh, that's an interesting point! Contestant Sasamiya is going up against Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies' Violet Weinberg. Overliezel's specialty is also long-range combat, but she's got a good variety of moves up her sleeve. Talk about exciting, getting two long-range fighters going up against each other like this!"*

*"Violet Weinberg is another entrant who has shown dramatic growth over a very short period of time. In fact, the way I see it, she's the cream of the crop as far as that group goes. The way she handles herself in close-combat especially has improved to an almost impossible extent, but the development of her abilities is the most dramatic thing*

*about her. It's like she's a completely different person than when she competed in the Gryps last year. If I had to single out one thing that's really caught my interest, it's that these entrants who have shown rapid growth all have a certain close-combat fighting style. It's almost like what they teach at Jie Long…"*

*"The sixth match is going to be an unusual one. We're looking at a contest between Allekant Académie's two substitute fighters, both autonomous puppets. On the one hand, we've got Contestant Rimcy, who we last saw in the Phoenix, and on the other, we've got a newcomer, the brand-new Contestant Lenaty. The former is fighting on behalf of Camilla Pareto, while the latter represents Ernesta Kühne. These two are apparently best friends, were tag partners during the Phoenix to boot, and were both responsible for initially developing the autonomous puppets in the first place. This fated encounter is going to be exciting to watch, don't you think?"*

"*To be honest, I'm not very interested in machines*," Zaharoula said with a hum. *"But…from what I saw in the preliminaries, Rimcy looks like she's gone through an evolutionary leap of her own as well. Her armaments have all been upgraded, so maybe that explains it? Lenaty's specs, on the other hand, are, to put it simply, incredible. I'm guessing they've both got more hidden moves that they haven't had to show off yet in the preliminaries, so it's hard to really get a proper reading of them."*

*"Moving on to the seventh match, we're looking at a clash between two stars from Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies. First up, we've got their number two fighter, Neithnefer. Despite being one of the world's top dancers, she apparently doesn't like facing the media. This is her first time entering the Festa since the last Lindvolus, but given how spectacular her hand-to-hand fighting skills were back then, I can't wait to see how much she's improved!"*

*"Out of the sixteen remaining entrants, she's definitely the best when it comes to fighting empty-handed. Jie Long's top fighters might have her beat as far as techniques go, but the way she systematically employs her skills is another kind of strength in and of itself. Hers is a flexible, if violently primitive, skill set with infinite scope for adaptation and change. The way I see it, only someone at the Celestial Warrior's level will be able to stand a chance against her."*

*"And of course, her opponent fighting for a position in the top eight is none other than Queenvale's number one, the world's most popular songstress and the runner-up from the last Lindvolus, Sylvia Lyyneheym!*

*But I'm sure there's no need to explain Sigrdrífa's accomplishments—her abilities speak for themselves! And I'm sure our viewers all remember her championship match against Erenshkigal in the last Lindvolus!"*

"*Sigrdrífa is the last of my three favorites once you take Erenshkigal out of the equation*," Zaharoula noted. *"You probably already knew that, though. Anyway, the way she's able to apply her abilities is nothing short of incredible. I'm inclined to think that her championship match last time was a bit one-sided, but she did manage to put up a pretty good fight. I don't think there's any room to doubt that she'll have the biggest chance of defeating Orphelia Landlufen this time around."*

"*Well then, we should move on to the final match of the fifth round!*" Yanase chimed. *"First up, we've got a bit of a surprise here—Allekant Académie's impressive Hilda Jane Rowlands. She's a famous researcher in her own right and a renowned and talented young woman over at Allekant, but the most mysterious thing of all has to be that she had never even entered an official ranking match before this, let alone a Festa. Even now, it's hard for me to believe, but in the preliminaries, her powerful abilities were enough to literally destroy the urm-manadite core of an Orga Lux! It was terrifying, let me tell you!"*

*"I've got a lot that I'd like to say about this one, but I'll keep it brief. Doesn't she remind you of someone else? That's what's got me bothered."*

*"She reminds you of someone?"*

*"Isn't it obvious? Her opponent this time, Orphelia Landlufen."*

*"Huh? Do you think so? I would have thought they were exact opposites… Ah, sorry! Right, Contestant Rowlands is going up against the current two-time victor of the Lindvolus, the undefeated champion currently hoping to become the first person in history to score three consecutive victories! To top it all off, she's even wielding an Orga Lux this time! With the Gravisheath, it's hard to say that she's got even a single blind spot! Erenshkigal, Orphelia Landlufen, is—"*

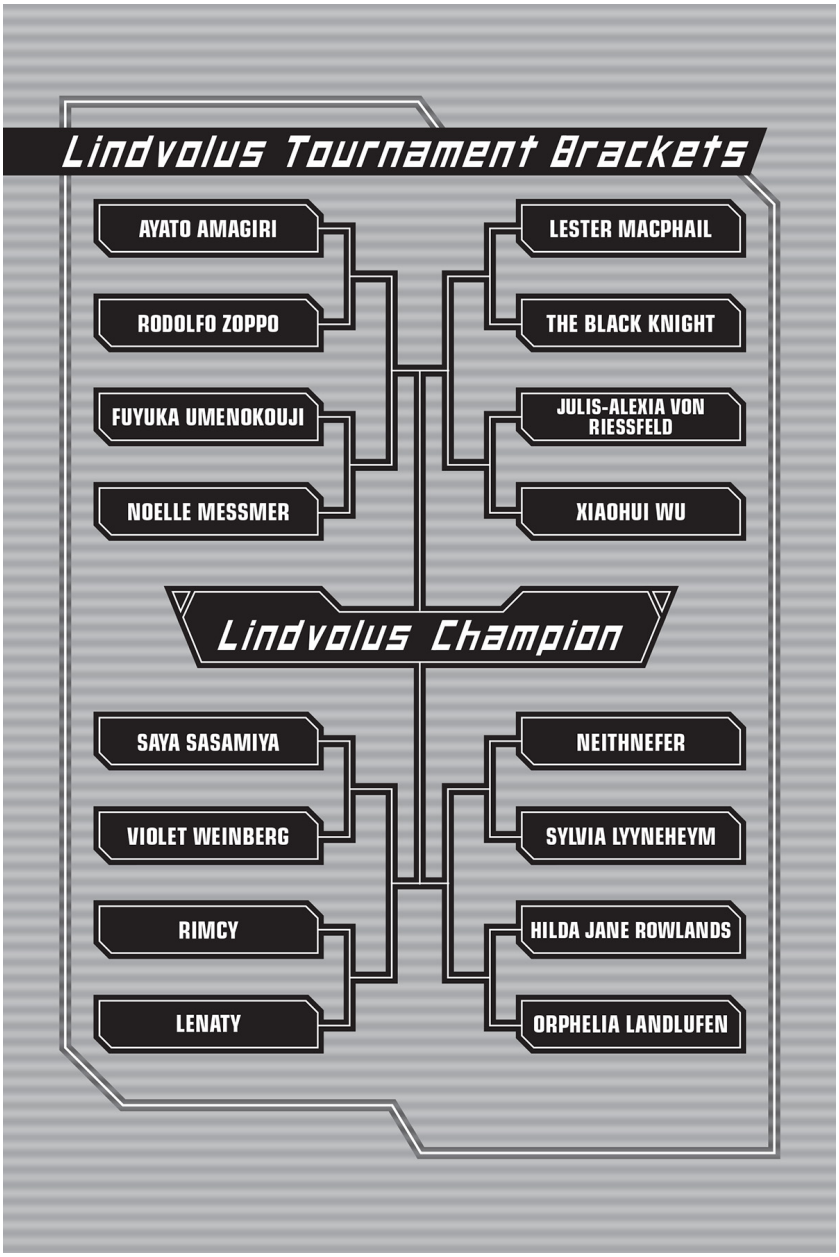
At that moment, the air-window suddenly snapped shut.

The young woman in the center of the room had lost all interest in the reporting.

It was a bare room, furnished with nothing more than a bed, windowless and pervaded by a wan darkness, and looked at first glance more like a prison cell than a student's domicile. The young, white-haired woman, sitting perched on the edge of that bed, closed her vacant, crimson eyes and let out a weak sigh.

"…Not long now… Just a little more, and finally…it will all be

over…”


Lindvolus Tournament Brackets
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RODOLFO ZOPPO
FUYUKA UMENOKOUJI
NOELLE MESSMER
LESTER MACPHAIL
THE BLACK KNIGHT
JULIS-ALEXIA VON RIESSFELD
XIAOHUI WU
Lindvolus Champion
SAYA SASAMIYA
VIOLET WEINBERG
RIMCY
LENATY
NEITHNEFER
SYLVIA LYYNEHEYM
HILDA JANE ROWLANDS
ORPHELIA LANDLUFEN

# AFTERWORD

Hi there, Yuu Miyazaki here. Since I've only got a little space for the afterword this time, I'll try to keep it brief. With this thirteenth volume of the story, the Lindvolus has finally gotten underway, and so we've got a comparatively high number of battles this time around. I wanted to include as many matches as I could from the preliminaries (originally, I had planned to include all the matches from the main tournament), but I bumped up against several limitations… In the end, it took everything I had just to show the main characters fighting at their best. However, I'm glad I was able to dedicate more time to discussing the Lost Luxes thanks to this change. With the preliminaries out of the way, I should be able to include all the main matches from Round Five, so rest assured! That means the next volume, number fourteen, will be absolutely filled with battles, too. I'll do my best to get it out to you all as soon as possible!

Now then, I'd like to thank okiura once more for the absolutely wonderful cover design and illustrations. Saya and Ayato take center stage on the cover. With her long hair, her gentle expression really is something to behold. Last time, we had Julis and Ayato; this time, we have Saya and Ayato; and next time…who, I wonder? I hope you're looking forward to Volume 14 as much as I am!

Last but not least, I'd like to express my gratitude to everyone involved. To my editor, O; to S, for helping me with the Kyoto dialect once again; to everyone in the editorial department; and of course, to you, my readers—thank you. I'm looking forward to seeing you all again with the next one.

*Yuu Miyazaki*

*February 2018*

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